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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract <p>Tutkielman tavoitteena on eritellä esityksellisen epäonnistumisen (performative failure) ilmenemismuotoja ruohonjuuritason anti-fasistisessa aktivismitoiminnassa. Tutkielma käyttää aineistonaan Loldiers of Odin aktivistiryhmästä koostettua materiaalipankkia, joka koostuu ryhmän nettisivuista, yhdestä videoidusta vastamielenosoituksesta, yhdestä YLE:n televisiohaastattelusta ja Helsinki Ilman Natseja-mielenosoituksesta koostetuista videoista, valokuvista ja muistiinpanoista. Tutkielma nojaa erityisesti Jack Halberstamin tunnetuksi tekemään queer-feministiseen epäonnistumisen tutkimukseen ja sijoittuu tutkimusotteeltaan sukupuolentutkimuksen ja esitysanalyysin välimaastoon. Aktivismiryhmän toiminnan, alkuperän erittelyn tai haastattelujen sijaan tutkimus keskittyy Loldiers of Odinin aktivismin performatiivisuuteen ja siihen miten esityksellinen epäonnistuminen ilmenee ryhmän julkisissa ulostuloissa ja interventioissa.</p> <p>Ruohonjuuritason aktivismin hengessä tutkimusmetodeina on käytetty artikulaatiota, provokaatiota ja yhdessä kulkemisen menetelmää. Artikulaation kautta tutkimus tarkastelee Suomen sosiopoliittista tilannetta vuonna 2016 ja avaa merkityksenannon tärkeyttä suhteessa kaduilla liikkuviin aktivisteihin ja ryhmän ulostulojen motiiveihin. Provokaatio asettaa klovniaktivistit esitysanalyysin raameihin verraten toimintaa katuteatterin ja soveltaen julkisen performanssin ja teatterin keinoja poliittiseen aktivismiin. Yhdessä kulkemisen menetelmä palauttaa tutkimuksen samalle viivalle tutkimuskohteensa kanssa kulkien mielenosoitusten mukana kokien antifasistisen aktivismin ja performatiivisen epäonnistumisen yhdessä klovniaktivistien kanssa.</p> <p>Tutkielma erittelee esityksellisen epäonnistumisen kolme ilmenemismuotoa: esityksellinen epäonnistuminen komiikan ja teatteriklovnerian tehokeinona, esityksellinen epäonnistuminen antifasistisen aktivistin työkaluna ja esityksellinen epäonnistuminen feministisenä tilana tai lokaationa. Teatteriklovnerian tehokeinona epäonnistuminen nojaa ajoitukseen ja yllätykseen. Vitsin voimakkuutta vahvistaa esitettävän hahmon sijoittuminen yhteiskuntanormien ulkopuolelle. Aktivistin työkaluna epäonnistuminen provosoi ja pyrkii asettamaan vastapuolen naurunalaiseksi. Loldiers of Odinin aktivismin reaktiivinen luonne tukee havaintoa siitä, että ryhmän interventiot toimivat parhaiten niiden ollessa suorassa vuorovaikutuksessa poliisin tai katupartioiden kanssa. Epäonnistuminen feministisenä tilana tai lokaationa palauttaa klovniaktivismin verrannollisuuden yhteiskunnan menestyksen ulkopuolelle jääviin rakenteellisiin häviäjiin, joihin kuuluvat mm. seksuaali- ja sukupuolivähemmistöt. Epäonnistuminen näyttäytyy feministisenä lokaationa, jossa kaikki on mahdollista koska epäonnistuminen asuu yksilön sijaan yhteiskunnan rakenteissa. Tällöin epäonnistumisesta tulee performanssi, aktiivinen leikki joka tekee näkyväksi rakenteellista sortoa. Loldiers of Odinin menestys aktivismiryhmänä nojaa tutkimuksen mukaan esityksellisen epäonnistumisen luovaan ja monipuoliseen hyödyntämiseen, josta voisi hyötyä moni muukin ruohonjuuritason yhteiskunnallinen toimija.</p>		
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# Loldiers of Odin and Clowns Against Fascism

## Powers of Performative Failure in Grassroots Anti-fascist Activism

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## 1. Introduction

This is a thesis about my worst fear: failure. My research topic is performative failure in grassroots anti-fascist activism. I'm interested how certain creative grassroots activist groups have managed to enhance the inner power of failure as a resistance technique and actively used it against the far-right activists and the police. For my case study of performative failure in grassroots activism I've looked at Loldiers of Odin, a Finnish anti-fascist clown activist group who emerged in 2016 to counteract the rise of Soldiers of Odin, a far-right street patrol movement started in Kemi, Finland.

In Loldier's of Odin's activism performative failure manifests itself in many different ways. In this thesis I separate three different dimensions of Loldiers of Odin's performative failure; failure as a comedy technique or a physical gag as a part of a performance, failure as a creative tool in activism and finally failure as a feminist space or location. These three different dimensions are addressed and explored through feminist research literature including writings by Jack Halberstam, Emma Goldman and Julia Kristeva.

Building my key argument on these feminist thinkers' views on power and activism, I reinforce the queer-feminist and anti-capitalist idea that failure shouldn't be viewed as the dreaded dark side of success but as *everything* that falls outside the capitalist ever-climbing, forward-thinking, fast-pacing norm of competition and growth. Failure can be intentional, voluntary or empowering like in comedy or in activism, or a way of existing in the world, like many queer people can testify. Failure is used in comedy as a technique to manipulate and bring in the laughter. Flop and gag as the physical representations of failure are comedy gold harnessed since the court jesters, medieval carnivals and later classic movie clowns like Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin. Gags rely on the elements of surprise and timing, best clowns often portraying characters like Chaplin's Little Tramp, who actively question societal norms through failure and flop.

Failure is used in activism as a tool to bring attention to structural shortcomings in the society surrounding the failing activists. Activists from Emma Goldman to Pussy Riot and Greta Thunberg have demonstrated how activism and a cause can benefit from a strong, norm-defying figureheads who are willing to step outside the expected and in doing so fail at the expectations set for them by the patriarchal society based on their age, ability, sexuality or gender expression. This draws media attention and support for the cause but is asking a lot from these activists who become one with their cause thus putting themselves in the forefront of personal risk and abuse. In terms of support and self-care, their cause can often fail them.

Being willing to fail as an activist is a tall order but it also calls attention to more open-ended, ambiguous conversation that generates more questions than answers. Failure is already a queer feminist space, an existing location and a way of being. As a feminist location, failure gathers the elements crucial for anti-capitalist queer feminist existence: humour, laughter, mischief, anarchism and abjection. Failure is a queer feminist superpower, visible in activism, arts and performance but also in everyday existence of queer people and other marginalised groups. I use abjection as a discourse to open up a conversation about queer feminist activism today. Abjection acts in this text as a way to interpret the complicated sociopolitical processes.

Loldiers of Odin tick all the boxes of failure I wish to cover in this thesis; failure as a clown practice, failure in anti-fascist activism and failure as a queer feminist location, a safer space for the losers and the drop-outs. Their work has allowed me to access failure as a multidimensional phenomenon that is, like clowning, in the constant process of evolution and growth. My research on Loldiers of Odin is a very thin slice of the pie of anti-fascist grassroots activism which (with a full force of a whole pie) has splattered all over Finnish far right. It's reactive, nonviolent and it's all based on failure, humour and mischief.

If anarchism is viewed as the freedom to take responsibility, clown activism takes on the responsibility to cleanse the violent tradition and image of anarchism. As a comical relief, clowning has the potential to bring us out from our reptile brain, our fight or flight-mode and start open up negotiation possibilities. Clowning can engage with the audience but also has the risk of alienating the opposition even further. Then again, when talking about neo-nazis and violent far-right, it's realistic to ask how much negotiation we want to engage in and how much we want to focus on the people still possessing hope and reason. Until then, Soldiers of Odin carry on marching, followed by a bunch of singing clowns. Humour is a difficult praxis but everyone knows how to fail. It's about how we deal with failure.

My writing style is lead by inspiration and feeling, and I recommend this as a method of reading too. Following the style of Goldman and Halberstam, this text doesn't exist to offer any readymade answers. Rather, my writing articulates, perceives and encapsulates. The aim is to walk together with the surrounding chaos that is the sociopolitical landscape of Finnish anti-fascist clown activism and point out meanings to generate further discussion and thought. The chapters are not polished, they're more like shapes forming on the surface of a sheet when thrown on the bed. I link different theorists freely and based on inspiration. It's a method to generate more conversation, inspired by Jack Halberstam and clown theorist Jon Davison.

My research position is placed somewhere in the crossroads of gender studies and performance analysis. As a gender studies major with a background as a performance artist I'm interested in analysing how the activists use their performing, characterised bodies as a comedic tool to ridicule and provoke their opponents. The main focus is on the activism itself and how does failure create space for itself within feminist grassroots activism.

After multiple failed attempts of contacting Loldiers of Odin for an interview, my research idea has developed into observing Loldiers of Odin's *performance / their action*. In this methodology it is crucial, that I don't proceed through getting information about the group's motives, individual members, their history of coming together, or the way they plan their actions. Instead my methods on "walking together" practice relies on the idea of observing, articulating and walking together, and concentrates solely on their performing activism.

Through writing about failure I've grown more accepting towards it as a part of my life as well as part of this thesis. Not just as the subject matter but failing in writing about failure. This text is filled with contradictions and inner conflicts and that's ok, as it demonstrates the layered nature of failure better than I ever could've intended. Expect nothing and everything, it's about to go tits up.

### **1.1 Case Study: Loldiers of Odin**

The clowns declined to break character to give interviews, though the clown who was arrested at the demonstration said afterward that he had made the police laugh when he was taken to the station. "It was lovely," the clown said of his arrest.

(Martyn-Hemphill, 2016)

My case study on performative failure in anti-fascist activism focuses on a Finnish activist group Loldiers of Odin, known for counter-protesting far-right vigilante groups and street patrols such as Soldiers of Odin and white supremacy groups like Nordic Resistance Movement (Pohjoismainen Vastarintaliike or PVL). Loldiers of Odin are dressed in colourful costumes and committing to nonsensical clown characters. The activists use clown makeup and clown names to build alter-egos and sense of performative fantasy during their interventions whilst disguising the activists' identities. The activists have, for example, followed Soldiers of Odin street patrols, "patrolling the Soldiers" and thus lightening, ridiculing, and arguably queering the vigilantes' narrative of "protecting" the country from the outside threat and the racialised other.

Loldiers of Odin's activists have also taken a visual stance during a counter protest Helsinki without Nazis against PVL's torch march on the Independence day of Finland in December 2016. Helsinki without Nazis demonstration which I personally attended and recorded observing the actions of Loldiers of Odin, is in the focus of my analysis. I use articulation and walking together as research methods to discuss the nature and logistics of this demonstration and other public appearances and interventions by Loldiers of Odin. My question is: what kind of role does failure play in LoO's queer-feminist and anti-fascist activism, and does it work as an intervention strategy?

Emerging in the early 2016 followed by the rise in numbers of asylum seekers and press coverage about sexual assault and terrorist attacks supposedly linked to them, Soldiers of Odin street patrols now operate in multiple cities in Finland, Northern Europe and Canada, and have appointed themselves as the protectors of the "Finnish way of life" (Soldiers of Odin, 2019). Various far-right groups have recently gathered new force in late 2018 following a series of sexual assaults in Oulu (YLE, 2018). Soon after launching active patrolling in Finnish cities such as Kemi and Tampere, Soldiers of Odin were faced with Loldiers of Odin, a counter-activist group set to champion multiculturalism whilst ridiculing far-right street patrols.

The clue for the aim can be found in their name: the play in words turning Soldiers to 'Loldiers', making a link to a famous online abbreviation LOL meaning 'laughing out loud'. The activists dressed in colourful clown outfits are set to question everything the Soldiers of Odin's nationalist rhetoric stands for whilst, in their own words, bringing "intergalactic peace, playfulness, open-mindedness and safer streets for all individuals, whether they are feeling grumpy or not" (Loldiers of Odin, 2016). The New York Times hasn't been the only highly regarded news outlet that wrote articles and reports on Loldiers of Odin in 2016; The Washington Post, The Independent and BBC amongst others made the clowns the main subjects of their articles on the asylum seekers entering the Nordic countries. Why is Loldiers of Odin so effective in their activism that almost overnight they've managed to draw a worldwide attention to their complex cause: the treatment of the asylum seekers, institutionalised racism and the rise of the far-right vigilante movements in Finland?

Her silliness, her grotesqueness, these are her humility, her apology if you like. She admits that she has no right to be taken seriously in the face of this enormous event, and yet she is determined to be heard, this juxtaposition, paradoxically, lets us love her and take her seriously.

(Salverson, 2008: 38)

In order to understand the viewpoint of the analysis later on, I wish to briefly discuss the two of the creative approaches Loldiers of Odin use in their activism that have made many of their interventions successful: the use of comedy and the reactive nature of their activism. Loldiers of Odin, as the name suggests, was created as a parody for Soldiers of Odin. On a video recorded during one of the group's first interventions, one can watch as against the dark and gloomy backdrop of mid-winter Tampere and silent leather-clad far-right patrols walking down the empty streets, the colourful group of clowns follow them playing tambourines and playing in the snow (Loldiers of Odin, 2016).

As Julie Salverson writes, clown's willingness to admit their own stupidity in the face of big, serious events can make the audience fall for them and listen to their message. Although if you ask the clowns, there is no message, only play. According to Eisenberg "the clown searches to create a game and to define the rules, which then must be obeyed" (in Davison, 2013). With Soldiers of Odin, the clowns have entered their version of 'Follow the Leader', but because failure is inevitable their version of following looks very different from the vigilantes'.

This is where clowns really enter the world of comedy and laughter. John Wright invites us to consider what are the physical impulses inspiring the comedy that makes us laugh in the world that's not about routine or structured comedic material like punchlines. In other words, once we understand the rules of the game, we can start to enjoy breaking them or watch the clowns fail to follow the rules they've set for themselves. This will lead us to find personal ownership of 'clown' as a level of play. (Wright, 2006, p.180)

Following the rules of play, clowns are reactive by nature. The part of Loldiers' effectiveness as activists, is to react directly and creatively to a stimulus presented by street patrols, other protesters, police or media without breaking the comedic character they've committed to. Their way of communicating through social media is as inconsistent and silly as their visual representation filled with an uneven mixture of capital letters and lower cases, random words and shouts in the middle of sentences and almost dadaistic video material (Loldiers of Odin, 2016).

This type of approach can also be highly provocative as we can see from Loldier's interview for YLE Aamu-TV morning news show where the activists refuse to break character and understand the normative behaviour or what could be considered normal or



proper in a situation like a television interview (Petozzi, 2016<sup>1</sup>). Watching the activists answering questions with more questions, singing and eventually riding around the studio with hobby horses as the interviewers sit awkwardly on their sofa, their space they've completely lost the control over, is simultaneously painful and delicious. Loldiers' silliness acts as a catalyst for a reaction that resembles Brecht's alienation effect in epic theatre. Aiming to break the illusion of theatre Brecht alienates the audience by reminding them about the fine line between reality and drama by addressing them directly.

Having to take a wider shot of the studio in order to capture the clowns riding around, the camera reveals more than it was meant to; the structure behind this particular TV-interview, now completely stripped from its' normative dignity by a bunch of clowns. As Counsell and Wolf propose "performance is a cultural practice, a practice of representation, and so inevitably enters the arena of ideology" (2001:31). When analysing performative activism, the links between culture, representation and ideology are even clearer to spot than when just analysing a performance.

Loldiers of Odin are activists that use clowning and performance as a part of their work. It's worth noting that they don't follow any specific clowning tradition, nor are they all trained clown practitioners. They break their characters during interventions, being inconsistent in their clowning and are clearly using clown as a method to further their own political agenda. It's true that for most clown traditions having premeditated aims and objectives is strictly against the practice (Davison, 2013). Even if Loldiers' interventions have been mainly improvised, their political standpoint no matter how innocent and silly, goes against the grain of many puritan clown practices.

Part of my argument is to demonstrate that it doesn't always matter if the active subject of an intervention is a trained clown or a political activist dressed up what can be interpret as clown, the theory behind the effectiveness of the use of comedy still applies within the discourse of reactive activism. I would go as far as suggesting that said inconsistency in Loldiers of Odin's practice can actually work for their favour as their counterparts' the Soldiers are so one dimensional and consistent in their straight white male rhetoric and aesthetic. I'd also like to think that if anything, Loldiers of Odin is failing at

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<sup>1</sup> According to Aamulehti newspaper, Finnish broadcaster YLE took down the 2016 Aamu-TV interview with LoO from its official streaming service Areena due to the interviews anarchistic and media-critical nature (2016). The video is currently only available on Youtube, uploaded by the user calling themselves Petozzi. The video can also be found on Finnish far-right online forums such as Homma.

what some perceive as ‘clowning’ which will only bring us back to the ultimate right of clowns: to fail (Moshaveva in Davison, 2013).

As Davison points out, thanks to this acceptance of an inevitable failure, “stories and experiences which seem impossible to express, and which we feel doomed never to succeed in overcoming, can be addressed” (Davison, 2013). Clowns, clown activism or any performance is not created in a vacuum. The inconsistency, reactivity and provocative interventions of Loldiers of Odin is their way as activists to comprehend the reality around us. To quote Davison “clowns are just as varied as any other phenomenon-they occur in different cultural contexts-there are often very precise reasons why they are the way they are.” (Davison 2013: 2). In order to look at these clowns any closer, we need to look at ourselves first.

## **1.2 Soldiers of Odin: what are the clowns up against?**

Emma Goldman defines anarchism as follows:

“The philosophy of a new social order based on liberty unrestricted by man-made law; the theory that all forms of government rest on violence, and are therefore wrong and harmful, as well as unnecessary.”-- Anarchism is not, as some may suppose, a theory of the future to be realised through divine inspiration. It is a living force in the affairs of our life, constantly creating new conditions” (1969: 50)

What I find more interesting than her definition on what anarchism is, is what it isn’t.

Anarchism for Goldman doesn’t offer any ready-made answers or dogma to live by. Here we return to the roots of her charming ambivalence. For Goldman, anarchism is a force that reacts to the world around us, creating and reacting to its own circumstance. Like Goldman’s essays, anarchist and anti-capitalist activism is not about providing a guide or a ten-step programme of inspiration. Instead, by reacting to the social system, anarchism both in theory and practice imposes important questions about power. Similarly, what makes Loldiers of Odin such an effective group of activists is their ability to react quickly and loudly and counteract far right street patrols through humour by challenging, or in other words queering, the rules of the circumstance Soldiers of Odin tries to operate in.

Anarchism, according to Goldman, opposes organised religion, property and the State which dictate the individual aiming for their absolute subordination (1969: 56). And yet, writes Goldman, there are a number of people who believe that “government rests on natural laws, that it maintains social order and harmony, that it diminishes crime and that it prevents the lazy man from fleecing his fellows.” (1969: 58). If we take a look at the core principles of Soldiers of Odin according to the association’s own website, they seem to fall into the

category of strong believers of such natural order. On the association's "About Us"-page consisting of six, short core principles the phrase "Finnish culture", "Finnish way of life" or a variant is mentioned ten times, often juxtaposed with immigration, globalisation and Islam which are portrayed as threatening to Finnish social harmony (Soldiers of Odin, 2019).

This raises the question, what are Soldiers of Odin against and what are they actually trying to protect by patrolling? In the following I offer my interpretation based on Soldiers of Odin's online presence and website (Soldiers of Odin, 2016). Soldiers of Odin seem to support the idea of a free, natural order that places certain people above the Finnish law and the government. This place is earned through vitalistic power that manifests almost automatically in certain individuals' whiteness, Finnishness and masculine gender expression. In their view the law and the government are blocking the free flow of this natural force they radiate, which would explain the strong leaning on mythological characters and Norse gods. The positive doctrine of this viewpoint is the idea of a strong and free individual who in their natural state not only performs their flow of power but does it righteously. In this infinite wisdom these individuals also have the right to use their power on others. Here lies the risk of vitalistic thinking creating an incubator for fascism.

Instead of protecting the law and helping the police with their street patrolling, Soldiers of Odin creates a spectacle in which vital, white male bodies take over a public space to perform as a natural force that brings natural harmony through violence and racial purity. Soldiers of Odin's self-appointed position as the protectors of the natural order and "the Finnish way of life" also comes with a patriarchal power dynamic which counts white Finnish women, "our women", as the target of the protection (Soldiers of Odin, 2016). Women and children seem to represent the natural harmony the men are protecting, and in their need for protection the women and children become submissive to their masculine demonstration of patriarchal power.

Soldiers of Odin openly criticises Finnish government (Soldiers of Odin, 2016). Their core activity as a street patrol association stems from an alleged lack of police presence and safety in local towns. This could take the analysis towards Nietzsche and natural power, in which the laws are made to protect the weak, and also towards critical masculinity studies. Henri Hyvönen (2019) talks about submissive protest masculinity when referring to a type of masculinity common amongst working class male identifying individuals. Protest masculinity often manifests in negativity towards authorities, as conservative views and as homosocial activities such as sauna, ice hockey or casual far-right activism. In this thesis I focus instead on the reactive activism sparked by Soldiers of Odin. To really understand the reasons behind

the rise of the far-right and the resonance in their rhetoric, who they think they protect and who they stand up against, requires a lot more resources that I have now at my disposal. This highlights the need for more critical academic research on whiteness, masculinities, nationalism and rising far-right mobilisations in Europe.

### **1.3 The archive‘ of LOL’s or three interventions of Loldiers of Odin: Helsinki without Nazis-demonstration, YLE Aamu-TV interview and Tampere intervention-video**

I analyse three different interventions by Loldiers of Odin: Helsinki without Nazis demonstration I participated in and observed the group in action as well as two different videos documenting the group in two very different situations first in the streets of Tampere following Soldiers of Odin and then at YLE tv-studio as morning show guests being interviewed about their activism. Using both participatory and video material allows me to both participate and distance myself from Loldiers of Odin and apply different methods of analysis.

The video filmed in Tampere in January 2016 was the one that attracted the attention of national and international media and catapulted the clowns into activist-fame. In the video which was uploaded to Youtube by the Loldiers themselves, we follow the clowns around the snowy streets of Tampere as they in turn follow the local branch of Soldiers of Odin patrolling. It’s important piece of research as it shows Loldiers in their element doing the thing they were created to do: to ridicule Soldiers of Odin. The idea is that Loldiers of Odin are also concerned about safety and want to protect people. With their clown logic, Soldiers of Odin will also need protecting so whilst they protect the streets, Loldiers will help by protecting them. In the video you can hear one of the clowns shout “hurry up, now they’re left without protection!” as the patrol marches on and the clowns are distracted by playing in the snow. They quickly run after them and start marching alongside and behind them. In this we see the clowns failing in protecting the patrol whilst generating humour.

One of the activists is wearing a long striped bathrobe, a bushy fake beard and a plastic viking helmet, announcing they’re Odin, the norse God of Thunder, but instead of thunder and lighting this Odin shares high-fives with the very few bystanders they come across. Loldiers of Odin follows the street patrol around the empty streets of Tampere, which adds an extra layer of silliness to the whole ordeal as there’s literally no one around for anyone to protect. Soldiers of Odin seem to just ignore the clowns singing and dancing around them, none of their faces are visible in the film.

At the end the clowns stop at traffic lights and dance in the circle around Soldiers. After letting the street patrol cross safely they wave and wish them well to their backs as they march off frame. Tampere in January creates a backdrop that produces more unintentional comedy by being so dark, cold and empty. The group of singing, colourful clowns stand out like a sore thumb whilst the street patrol dressed in black marches on in the snow. It's the juxtaposition of the two sides, their strange yet mutual power play and the snowy backdrop of Finland that really frames Loldiers of Odin as something new, weird and exotic.

Following the fame of Tampere-video, Loldiers of Odin was invited to YLE morning show Aamu-TV to be interviewed. When interviewing Loldiers of Odin the hosts don't really get a chance to become anything but a soundboard for a live-provocation. By using the same technique as with Soldiers of Odin in Tampere, after twisting and turning few questions the clowns quickly start acting like the journalists and start interviewing them. This is visibly uncomfortable for the morning show hosts who try to answer "normally" to clowns absurd questions which in turn very quickly turn into serious notes on how the Finnish media has treated the asylum seekers; "Why is media talking about a crises and waves when referring to the refugees who are people, not waves?" one clown asks (Petozzi, 2016). The clowns ride their hobby horses around the studio<sup>2</sup> and leave without warning whilst singing. Youtube-video's comment section is filled with people outraged by this behaviour that doesn't "respect" the model of an interview; according to the comments Loldiers of Odin are a disgrace, mentally disturbed and only embarrassing themselves.

To question so openly an invisible power structure between politics and media during a live tv-interview is one of the greatest failures I've seen. This also demonstrates an extremely clever way to turn mainstream media against itself. To refuse the setting and forcing the setting to cave in, if just a little bit, is phenomenal achievement in activism. To also produce such a strong response is a clear indicator that Loldiers' activism is hitting a nerve that's not used to getting poked. Watching this video it almost feels like the Finnish media system can't comprehend that something as serious as the rise of the far right and the rights of the asylum seekers can be discussed through humour. Once again, Loldiers has failed to live up to the expectations set up for them, which seems to give them super-powers to carry on provoking the strong and powerful.

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<sup>2</sup> In Finnish a hobby horse ("keppihevonen") can refer to a manufactured or intentionally produced political narrative that can be used to further one's own agenda.

For Helsinki without Nazis demonstration I bring a recorder, a camera and a notepad with me to document the clowns in action. I had informed the group before about writing this thesis but I want to walk together with them as an activist without them knowing about my exterior research agenda. Based on these notes and videos I took during the demonstration I put together a report I use to analyse Loldiers of Odin's intervention that day.

HwN-demonstration takes place on the 6th of December 2016. It's an Independence Day counter-demonstration against PVL and their far-right torch march around Helsinki. Loldiers of Odin has a big and important role as one of the leaders of the counter demonstration, their activists can be seen dotted around the event from start to finish. It makes a lot of sense to get a reactive activist group to lead a counter demo, many of the participants seem to recognise the clowns and getting excited about them being involved. It shows the groups evolution from provocative followers of Soldiers of Odin to leaders of a counter protest, how they shifted from being a sideshow to main act within less than a year of existence.

The route of HwN-demonstration runs around Helsinki city centre, starting from the central railway station Rautatientori and finishing in the Kaisaniemi-park close by. At the beginning Loldiers focus on *play*, and facilitate warm-up games and sing-a-longs for the other participants whilst the organisers are getting everyone ready to march. It feels necessary to lighten up the mood, the tension is evident and many people sound worried about the potential collision between the far right torch march and the counter protesters. Seeing Loldiers of Odin take the stage and play, frees most of us to join in and even laugh out loud at their awkward attempt to lead the protest. The reoccurring tactic of Loldiers seems to be power-play; they take on leading, high status a role (a street patrol member, a reporter or a serious agitator) and they publicly fail at it. This releases tension and often annoys the opposition as it signals that the clowns are not taking the situation seriously. This is absolutely true, yet the activists behind the clown mask are dead serious. They are using the annoyance to their full advantage by failing even harder and louder whilst attracting a lot of attention.

Once the march starts we soon pass a famous statue of Kolme Seppää, which Loldiers quickly claim as their spot and climb on it. Instead of anti-fascist flags or placards with slogans they had inflatable balloon fish in the end of long sticks. After climbing the statue they start waving the balloon fish like a flag, shouting nonsensical slogans. With Vanha Ylioppilastalo and its history as the heart of the students' occupy-movement in 1968 as the

backdrop the new revolutionaries in their clown outfits seem to demand a new big change whilst gently poking fun at the whole leftist-movement for not changing much in 50 years.

As we approach Varsapuistikko, the tension rises as this is where the two marches will run into each other. The police is out in full riot gear, the road has been blocked with police vans and the dark winter evening is filled with bright blue and red colours. I momentarily lose track of the clowns, they've raised to the top of the march. I can see them carrying their balloon fish and singing over the riot police's shoulder at the PVL-demonstrators. This is as far as we come to a direct *provocation*, it seems Loldiers has now actually adapting to the role of the leader, focusing more getting us passed the barriers safely and making sure the situation doesn't escalate.

We arrive in Kaisaniemi-park where another long line of police vans has split the park from the middle: on the other side there are PVL-demonstrators, on the other to counter protesters. Loldiers of Odin activists are gathering people, passing on information and keeping up the spirits. They direct people away from the police vans towards the stage where the organisers are about to start speaking. This is more traditional *activism* in focusing on and organising other people. It bares repeating that the tension was extremely high and the fear of a violent riot was very real. It called out for more support rather than more provocation, and Loldiers of Odin took this on board by using their platform to care for other activists. Yet they also managed to lighten up the dire mood whilst looking after their fellow activists.

#### **1.4 Research Methods: Activist researcher Articulating and Walking with Provocateurs**

I'm now presenting my research methods, the ways and techniques I have applied into my research in order to explore the case study of Loldiers of Odin in all its politically charged, creative queer ridiculousness. As Loldiers' practice touches various discourses from performance to queer representations and from activism to comedy it has been only fitting to include three very different research methods from different fields to support my argument. The research includes methods from both cultural and performance studies whilst also including a method from more political and active research tradition of critical theory and participatory research.

##### Articulation

Articulation as a method in Cultural Studies is simultaneously a method and a theory (Vaahtera, 2018). It traces how in cultural texts some ideas are connected to other ideas.

Articulation theorizes with these connections between ideas whilst simultaneously rejecting deterministic approaches to culture. According to Chantal Mouffe signifiers that don't possess meaning in themselves can achieve significance when articulated through sociopolitical discourse. For Mouffe, the effect of articulation is that we piece together our identities by using multitudes of discursive forms (1993: 46). For Elizabeth Bishop it is in this *failure* to fully determine one's identity by using one fixed discourse "that allows for the engendering of dynamic sociopolitical spaces with greater choice and agency" (2015: 112).

Bishop has applied Mouffe's use of articulation theory in her work with youth activists. For her it "supports the development of an ontology of democratic citizenship through an analysis of reflexive agency" (2015: 117). By extracting elements such as tactics, organisations, issues, texts and locations, Bishop found a way to better understand how the participants define themselves as activists in relation to their moment. From improvised provocations and leading counter-protests to appearing on music videos and tv-interviews with no intention to respect the surrounding hegemonic discourse of power, Loldiers of Odin creates meaning in relation to their moment whilst failing to fully pinpoint their own meaning or identity.

I use articulation theory as a framework to better understand and explore the constitution of sociopolitical identities - such as that of clown activist, far-right street patrol member or queer artist of failure. Articulation, like failure, exist in this research in relation to "fluid discursive spaces of human rights activism." (Bishop, 2015:120). Articulation is a fitting method to research Loldiers of Odin, and in turn Loldiers' case is relevant to Cultural Studies, especially if we look at culture not only as a production of practices and meaning but as an idea, that can be politicised and used when fighting over certain meanings and signifiers.

The post-colonial critique has pointed out the power relations between the colonizers and the colonized, and how the indigenous people were viewed as ductile and adaptable in relation to the colonizers (Vaahtera, 2018:18). Through articulation theory we can look at the sociopolitical situation in Finland in 2016 and try to pinpoint the cultural ideas, assumptions ja viewpoints on nation and nationality that have been used to fuel very different political projects, in this case national immigration politics, far-right street patrols and rebel clown activists.



## Provocation

The method I'm using from performance studies is based on Bim Mason's and Vincent Turner's idea of provocation and its three phases as a part of a street performance. Mason is a highly regarded British director, writer and teacher specialising in street and physical performance. From feminist standpoint Mason's book *Provocation in Popular Culture* (2016) includes a rather lazy attempt to understand why solo street performance is a male dominated art form. Mason offers production of testosterone, greater culturally inherited confidence, physical bravado and territory domination as some of the reasons why this area of work is performed primarily by men (2016:16).

Mason completely fails to recognise his beloved street as a location of power, on which very different cultural discourses and structural oppressions are in play in relation to gender, race, personal space and safety. He seems to think street performers are driven by some biological urge to mark their territory whilst establishing dominance. I would argue that living in a western, capitalist patriarchy where the street is still for most of us a toxic battleground of white masculinity we've been conditioned through circumstance to view female-presenting subjects or even performances of femininity either as a threat or an invitation, whether we are street performers or not. It is a great white male privilege to choose when to be on show or when to disappear into the crowd whereas many of us are always seen as provoking whether we choose that position or not. Provocation is about playing with power, but we shouldn't assume the power is distributed evenly. It never is.

In order to understand provocation and its three phases in the context of performance I must first talk about play, risk and parody. Since these are broad, complicated and tested terms carrying multiple meanings within performance studies, I'll only focus on the ones that are closely relevant for my research on Loldiers and the type of play, risk and parody they engage with in their provocative activism.

Play, according to Johan Huizinga, is a "contest for something or a representation of something". (Mason, 2016:17). Risk, in relation to play, is expanding the "notion of contest to the idea of the contest with the self" (2016:18). In Mason's writing a performer is interchangeable with a player; as someone who partakes in a play or someone who plays. According to Mason, the combination of play and risk creates an opposition that is unstructured, ambiguous in its methods and ambiguous as to whether it is play or is serious. Also known as a provocation (2016:19).

In order to create a provocation, the provocateurs need someone to provoke. For Mason “any seriousness or self-righteousness offers itself as a target, regardless of its particular perspective or provenance” (2016:17). Despite the particular provenance, or maybe because of it, the seriousness and self-righteousness of Soldiers of Odin street patrols paired with the singing and dancing clown activists was a juxtaposition that created media attention worldwide (Martyn-Hemphill, 2016).

Mason also notes that “an outwardly playful action may also present a direct and serious challenge and must be overcome by authorities in order to avoid their public loss of status” (2016:17). An example of this type of provocative challenge is the TV-interview with Soldiers of Odin where they refuse to answer any questions seriously and end up dancing around the studio, visibly frustrating the hosts of the show who after multiple attempts give up and start to play along and answer clowns’ provocative questions. Mason writes about play and risk coming together in a performance that has social or political aims to highlight the textbook provocation and risk taking actions by Soldiers of Odin:

Willingness to take risks emerges from play but gives power. If a player has a sense of injustice they may use this power to challenge various forms of dominant power. In addition having experienced the empowering benefits, these player-provocateurs become advocates of risk-taking so that, by leading others into risk, they may destabilise them out of old patterns of perception and activate them into a search for new systems of thinking. (2016:19)

In clowning, the performer plays with the suffering of the status drop. In parody, that role is assigned to the established and privileged. This has in Soldiers’ case meant the street patrols, the police, the media...even the official Finnish clown association in Finland who wanted to reward Soldiers’ as the clowns of the year in 2016. The activist group didn’t turn up at the ceremony but instead sent two people dressed as secret agents to read a pre-written speech (Soldiers of Odin, 2019). This type of provocation raises the players in relation to the parodied and thus an inversion occurs. As Mason writes; “The comic actively provides a different perspective which supplies the foundation for potential social change” (2016:20).

Instead of clowns, Bim Mason talks about “player-provocateurs” which opens clowning practices also to other performers with similar aims in risk taking, such as street performers. As the clown practice of Soldiers of Odin clown activists can’t be verified, they also fall under player-provocateur category. Especially as, unlike some clowns, player-provocateurs have clear aims of what they wish to achieve through their risk taking. Soldiers’ aim is to disturb and/or defuse street patrol and far right events through performance. Mason writes:

player-provocateurs become advocates of risk-taking so that, by leading others into risk, they may destabilise them out of old patterns of perception and activate them into a search for new system of thinking ---the combination of play and risk creates the ambiguity whether the situation is play or serious. (2016:19)

For Maison a player-provocateur is a performer who knows the rules of the game they're playing and is willing to break them in order to create reactions in the audience. This applies whether we'd look at a piece of street theatre or more open-ended performative intervention. Player-provocateur knows the role they're playing and are confident to lead their audience through the performative experience. Calling them actors would dismiss the idea of independent decision making and toying with the audience ie *provoking* them which is key to clowning and arguably every other type of performance that relies on direct contact with the audience, for example stand-up or a live drag-show.

The three phases of provocation according to Mason are; initiating action, liminal phase and reorientation (2016:26). The initiating action can be small and mild in comparison to what follows later. The initiating action contains an element of risk, but is mainly to establish the players' relationship with their audience and the potential targets for their provocations. The first phase has a sense of challenge as the provocateurs group and one or two of them will take charge of the audience as the rest will scout for potential challenges. As an example of the initiating action is Loldiers of Odin activists singing and dancing on stage at Rautatienitori in front of other demonstrators before the march begun.

The liminal phase is when the main provocation occurs. Both the provocateurs and the people getting provoked are in an unknown territory, some highly vulnerable during the search of reorientation. The march itself during "Helsinki without Nazis" was a liminal phase during which some of the activists took over some statues and flew big balloon fish as others marched in front of the demonstration chanting. The highest point of risk took place in Kaisaniemi where the HwN-demonstration collided with Nordic Resistance Movement's Independence Day march HwN was protesting against.

The last phase, reorientation, is when the participants are in still in high alert associated with risk but have started to share the experience with others who participated. This phase also includes guidance and a level of control as re-evaluation finally leads to re-positioning. If the provocation has been successful, an enhanced sense of community might occur amongst the people who have shared the risk. This phase took place in Kaisaniemi park where, still in high alert due to the park being divided by police and Nordic Resistance Movement on the other side of a row of police vans, people started talking to each other as

Loldiers of Odin guided participants towards the stage where the organisers of HwN were talking.

As I'm analysing the actions of Loldiers of Odin during "Helsinki without Nazis" with more depth in the following sections, I'll be using these three phases as a guideline to differentiate various actions that took place during the demonstration. This will create an arch, if not a plot, for their provocation and will highlight the theatrical side of the group's activism.

### Activist research and Walking together

The characterisation of "Activist research" stands for the kind of research traditions and methods through which the social reality and its phenomenon are viewed, explored and changed in collaboration with other people and groups active in various other fields of research, education and activism. Depending on the emphasis, activist research can also be called militant research, radical research, engaged scholarship, research as praxis or action-oriented-research. It's based on the radical assumption that people are equal and that the research conducted should maintain and reflect this fact. If this isn't the case the activist research aims to actively change that for the better. (Suoranta and Rynänen, 2014:16-18)

Activist research is bound by the society it operates in: it's based on horizontal relations between different agencies and groups: the researcher is either a part of the group they're researching or they will join the group in order to conduct the research and to make a difference within it. Activist researcher doesn't only participate and take notes but actively tries to use their position to make their findings public through teaching, speaking, writing and even performing by using artistic means (Suoranta and Rynänen, 2014:21).

During this research project I have participated in various demonstrations to observe Loldiers of Odin but also to attend as an activist and create networks. I have presented papers in symposiums dressed as a clown and performed my poetry outside the parliament. All of this has been a contribution towards my activist research and has provided me with a deeper understanding of provocation, performance and failure in activism. For me it is just as important to generate new ideas, dreams and utopias about what we could achieve as people and as a society than it is to provide academia with analysed, "factual" findings about my research. This makes me, in Suoranta and Rynänen's words, a flipped academic (2014:99).

According to Bruton a flipped academic:

- acts first, publishes later
- participates in the society and enables others to participate
- emphasises developing social practices
- views research funding as an investment, not the end result
- instead of just producing teaching materials and lectures, also develops and produces spaces and events that enable learning
- acts where and when expected. (Bruton, quoted in Suoranta and Ryyänen, 2014:99)

Flipped academic doesn't differentiate between conceptual work and the practical work that takes place in the society. They're both part of the bigger picture, included in and benefiting one another (Suoranta and Ryyänen, 2014:99-100).

When researching Loldiers of Odin in action during Helsinki without Nazis-demonstration I applied an activist research method called Walking together. As a research method I use it to enter a situation and experience it as freely without preconceptions as possible. After walking together I reflect the experience back to my research. Walking together allowed me to be led through the demonstration by the people who were the experts and personally involved. In my case these experts were the organisers of NwH and Loldiers of Odin. This method is less of a fact-finding mission and more of a spatial intervention that challenges both the situation and the participants to look at things differently. (Suoranta and Ryyänen, 2014:154-160)

During the demonstration I took videos, photographs and notes. These are all an important part of walking together as a method. There should be as little difference between the researcher and their subjects as possible. What's fundamental, is the shared interest towards the outside world, map out and share experiences and a need to affect change. It's an effective research method, especially at the beginning of a project when generating new questions instead of answering the existing ones.

For an activist researcher using walking together as a method to document provocations, bodily experience replaces the pre-written research plan. Much like The Situationist International when they combined avant-garde art with Marxism in their aimless urban wondering to challenge city planning as a form of social power. This position also offers itself for a feminist reading; mapping out intersections of private and public and how they affect our everyday lives. The everyday is seen as a political dimension and as a source for resistance. (Suoranta and Ryyänen, 2014:163)

## **2. Failure as a Gag in Comedy**

In this chapter I introduce clown and gag theory in order to demonstrate how Loldiers of Odin uses theatrical clowning and its professional tricks to enhance their activism. I analyse them as a group of performers, how they operate when viewed as a group of professional clown practitioners. Through performance, comedy and clown theory research I arrive at the conclusion that clown is especially powerful performance practice because of the clever use and abuse of the following discourses: failure, humanity, time (here and now) and manipulating both illusions and laughter. This conclusion was further enforced at a symposium “Clowns and Power” organized by Circomedia as a part of London International Mime Festival in 2017. UK’s leading clown practitioners and theorists gathered to discuss what makes clowns powerful and whether or not a clown with power is in fact an oxymoron since an argument can be made that clowns wouldn’t recognise such structures (Mason, 2017). The symposium exists in two parts on Vimeo, uploaded by the organisers.

When talking about clowning in this chapter, I’m specifically referring to theatre or circus clowning and activist clowning which has its roots in theatre clown practice. I don’t consider birthday party clowns or hospital clowns or organisations like Clowns without Borders in this instance as it is a different practice with different aims and objectives. It’s worth noting that these clowns who work specifically with children in various challenging settings set a different tone and aim for their clown work than many theatre clowns or clown activists working with adult audiences. With adults, the provocation and taboo-breaking often takes the priority whereas with children it’s more often education, safety or pure foolery for the sake of catharsis produced by laughter.

Gags are physical jokes that make clown’s failure visible to the audience. It’s often the catalyst for provocation or laughter or in many times both simultaneously. In a world where a lot of power is placed on words and verbal or written communication, gag is a physical manifestation of clown presence, which challenges the norms and power structures, often as simply as just failing at the most mundane of tasks or interactions. Gag theory is the theoretical framework for this physical comedy and the ways to create it within performing arts.

Like Jon Davison argues, clown’s existence challenges the unwritten rules of society, the rules that are so supposedly obvious there are no laws about them: you shake hands when saying hello, you tighten screws with a screwdriver, if you are a guest on a morning tv-show,

you sit on the sofa and you answer the questions. Through gags, clowns break these rules and in doing so, reveal something fundamentally ridiculous about the society and can make us ask: why? (2012)

After taking a break from my own artistic practice due to constant fear of failure I found new meaning and some personal liberation and joy in the way Jack Halberstam picks apart the myths of positive thinking and success revealing them as a part of the capitalist heterodomination in *Queer Art of Failure* (2011). As one the leading queer-theorists of 21<sup>st</sup> century Haöberstam brings academic weight behind researching failure in the context of gender studies and feminist theory. By analysing the gagging rebel clowns as queer artists of failure, I aim to expand Halberstam's work on failure, "silly archives" and low theory. Through its strong visual components and long history, Loldiers of Odin's activist clowning makes a great addition to the mix of failing queer artists who will eventually change the way we see the world.

## **2.1 Clown Theory on Power**

Bim Mason chaired the Clown and Power Symposium on 21st January in London, as part of London International Mime Festival 2017. I attended the symposium as a part of this research project and had an excellent opportunity to engage with some of the Europe's leading clown practitioners and academics and learn about their views on clown and power. This symposium acts as a catalyst for my analysis and provides here an accessible medium to the world of modern clowning and their use of power as a part of their play and practice. Two panels of leading clown practitioners, including Nola Rae, John Wright, Jon Davison, Hilary Ramsden and Maggie Irving, took a serious look at an apparently frivolous subject.<sup>3</sup> (Maison, 2017)

Clowns engage with all kinds of power play: there are status-drops, gags and flops. There are Auguste clowns and White Clowns, light and dark clowns. If clown actors are ok with using their own silliness, does this lack of fear give them more power? Are clowns playful anarchists and if so why are their actors often so seriously principled? As they move outside formal spaces, can they disguise their serious intentions behind the perception of naivety and frivolity?

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<sup>3</sup> The two panel discussions can be accessed on Vimeo video streaming service, courtesy of Bim Maison, the organiser of the symposium.

For Maison, clowns are life affirming because they can't die. They constantly fail, but they also always bounce back. By using the example of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin as the famous underdogs, Maison describes a world that's falling apart, but against all odds the clown always survives. The clown's use of power is so strong that even witnessing or celebrating someone breaking the rules to that extent, becomes anti-authoritarian in itself. (Bim Maison, 2017)

According to LeCoq everything about clown is based on play. Clown doesn't take anything seriously, and this includes morality. This results in inconsistent actions which clown is too naive to understand the consequences of. Everything is just a game, which makes it all about influence and impact (Bim Maison, 2017). By making people laugh the clown directly influences their audience which allows them to also have a direct impact later on. Through this impact they can, as John Wright suggests, "challenge or shatter an illusion" (Bim Mason, 2017). Though Wright was referring to theatre where he uses clown characters to provide a reality check or to break the fourth wall, Loldiers of Odin also possess this power whilst acting in the real world. Instead of the fourth wall the shatter people's expectations of normality and safety by ridiculing the ones who take these things for a granted privilege reserved only for them.

For some clown academics a powerful clown may sound like an oxymoron, but for clown practitioner Nolah Rae it's all embedded in failure as it reveals humanity in both the performer and their audience. For Rae, showing humanity is the biggest power move in clowning (Bim Mason, 2017). Known for her stereotypically masculine clown characters like kings and dictators, Rae argues that clown is always playing a game with their audience, and the clown must win. Clown wins the game by doing what the clowns do best; by making up the rules and by being totally unpredictable (Bim Mason, 2017). Most of Rae's clown characters don't talk, and Loldiers of Odin talks either "wrong" or gibberish. This is a strong power move in the world where the majority of the interaction relies on words.

It's important to note that there are as many views on clown and clowning as there are people interested in the subject. The world of clown and clowning is confusing and can mean multitude of things, even simultaneously (Bim Mason, 2017). Clown and power holds a lot of contrasting meanings which in a way makes clown so powerful in the first place; their ambiguity. As one of the leading clown theorist in the UK, Jon Davison also reminds that there's a difference between theorising about the character of a clown, and real clowns operating in the real world, since the clown is always working on here and now and is tied to



their circumstances. This is true in the case of Loldiers of Odin who are very much operating in the real world as clown activists but can't be put in one box and labelled in terms of clown theory.

In the context of devising theatre, John Wright sees the value of clown as a method of play to generate and inspire new ideas. Clown enables the actor to find meaning in here and now instead of over analysing. In the context of theatre, which is all about make-believe, the clown has the ability to challenge and shatter certain illusions and to keep the audience on their toes when needed. Clown can also provide a sense of relief through laughter when necessary. (Bim Mason, 2017).

In the case of Loldiers of Odin the similar rules apply, only instead of theatre the activist clowns either shatter the illusion of safety surrounding us or generate laughter at the far-rights expense. Bim Maison points out that provocation is less often affective when trying to change the minds of others and more powerful in bringing the own tribe closer together (Bim Maison, 2017). Loldiers of Odin seem to take this on board in their activism: they are not out there to change to minds of Soldiers of Odin. Rather, their provocation is to bring joy and relief to those who see the presence of far-right street patrols as threatening.

## **2.2 Profanation and Gag Theory**

Profanation is not so much the breaking of a rule made explicitly in a legal code as the exposure of the rule of rules, the principle of principles that are so fundamental for the holding together of the regulative system that they cannot be formulated  
(Bouissac, P. 1997:197)

Clowns are in many ways profane, not least because they regularly tap into the resource of the unwritten rules and make them visible and silly. Paul Bouissac shares a story about a man that one day was discovered sitting on the bed of Queen Elizabeth II. No important law had been broken, but many viewed this action so outrageous it required a punishment. However, even more embarrassing would have been for the parliament having to pass a law specifically for this action as it would have only highlighted that someone other than the Queen sitting on the Queen's bed was indeed even a possibility.

As Jon Davison puts it, consciously articulated written laws require no revealing by the clown. "It is instead the rules which are unwritten, unspoken, and therefore hidden from view, which require clowns attention. By stepping on or over the line of these norms, clowns reveal them to the rest of society" (Davison, 2013:163). For the man sitting on the Queen's

bed, for this unintentional real-life clown, there were eventually two options: the accusation of treason or labelling as mentally ill. This reveals the stigmatized social status of the clown : “the only way is to disqualify the profanator by presenting him as an insane person, excluding him from the system that his action jeopardised” (Bouissac, 1997:197). For Bouissac and Davison, clowning is always playing with fire, only it is often the flame of life in the core of each society the clowns are most drawn to. Or as Bouissac puts it: “In a way we could say, metaphorically, that every morning a clown sits on the Queen’s bed, at the risk of losing his passport” (1997:197)

Clowning is in its core about taboo-breaking. This is also one of the reasons why we either like or dislike clowns and why our relationship with clowning often tells more about us than it does about clowning. One only has to take a look at the comment section on the video of Loldiers of Odin at YLE-interview to see how uncomfortable their clown-presence and the lack of respect towards the tv-interview as a situation makes some of us (Petozzi, 2016). Arguably these kind of cultural rituals are best challenged by ritualistic figures like clowns. Rituals such as birth, matrimonial alliances, death, borderlines between human and animal, structure of identities...these are all common topics in clowning like in any other performance art form. One could also add nationalism and patriotism to the list, as many clowns have depicted dictators, most famously Charlie Chaplin. By using Chaplin as an example I’ll now discuss gag as a comedy theory and how it operates in Loldiers of Odin’s performance.

In the factory scene of *Modern Times*, Charlie Chaplin’s Little Tramp gets stuck in the machine after failing to tighten the bolts fast enough and getting sucked into the assembly line. After that he proceeds to tighten anything but bolts with his screwdriver, for example people’s noses. He also pushes all the buttons and pulls all the leavers resulting in a big explosion and getting chased by the rest of the assembly line workers whilst squirting them with oil. (Charlie Chaplin Official, 2019)

Gag is a physical representation of a joke, created by a comedian or a clown.

Bouissac’s gag theory simplified by Jon Davison goes as follows:

1. things are in the wrong place
2. things are used by the wrong people or are used wrongly
3. doing something for the wrong people
4. doing something when you shouldn’t, or not doing it when you should
5. misunderstanding word, and maybe acting on the misunderstanding

The principle: only one element must be wrong at the time, ie. person, place, time, action, word, behaviour or object. (Davison, 2013:166)

Looking at Loldiers of Odin's morning show interview, the moment the camera turns to the clowns things are in the wrong place. These colourfully dressed clowns in their full makeup and massive hats and wigs don't quite match the expectation of a traditional morning news show guest. There are three of them in the plainly decorated studio sitting on a low sofa facing two reporters sitting on an equally low sofa facing them. The reporters are tense but smiling, the clowns are staring at them with their mouths open like they have no idea what's happening and why are they there.

Things are used by the wrong people when the clowns start interviewing the reporters. This is also doing something for the wrong people as the reporters suddenly have to come up with answers to clowns questions whilst remaining professional and holding on to their fleeting status as the more powerful player in the game. Loldiers definitely do things when they shouldn't as they start giddy-upping with their hobby horses around the studio. They also don't really answer any of the reporters questions directly or at all. They seem to misunderstand the whole situation and leave unannounced whilst singing leaving the reporters to sit on the sofa slightly dumbfounded. In this instance the mutual failure, facilitated by Loldiers of Odin, acted as a revelation of truth more than just as a theatrical effect.

The world of theatre and circus is an endless account of failures, flops and shortcomings. Professional performers train years learning to hide these failures no matter how small. But trying to succeed, sooner or later we must fail. We can accept this failure in full view of an audience, who will see everything as long as the performer lets them. This creates an effect, for the audience and for the performer, that something that is usually hidden is being revealed. This revelation convinces us that what we are witnessing is in a sense fuller, more authentic or more real than what we normally come across (our "social masks"). We might call this "clown presence". Is this clown presence the real reason for the fear of clowns? There are all the horror films but that's not digging deep enough. Maybe fear of clown is fear of failure, unease in front of someone just not getting it right.

### **2.3 Loldiers of Odin as Queer Artists of Failure**

The idea for this whole thesis started when I read Jack Halberstam's *Queer Art of Failure* (2011) that made me rethink my biggest fear and to go straight towards it rather than trying to desperately succeed. For Halberstam, failure stands for the ways of knowing and being that

are placed outside of conventional understanding of success (2011, p. 2). In other words, for Halberstam failure is not just the dark, unwanted flip side of success but rather *everything else* that falls outside the rather limiting narrative of a liberal subject and their success story.

Halberstam unapologetically attacks the American cult of positive thinking calling it a mass delusion: the thinking that implies that success happens to good people who work hard and failure is only a consequence of a bad attitude (2011, p.3). The saying “don’t hate the game hate the player” springs to mind, but what if the game itself is rigged? For Halberstam the success is not up to the goodness or work-ethic of an individual but the outcome of the tilted scales of race, class and gender (2011:3)

Since living in a binary-gendered patriarchy the feminine success is always measured by male standards. In this light failure sounds like a good shout for any self-respecting feminists. Falling outside the binary as a gender failure can also mean being relieved of the pressure to measure up to heteronormative ideals, not succeeding in feminine womanhood can offer surprising amounts of freedom.

Halberstam suggests that the feminist losers and other dropouts and refuseniks outside the norm would use this freedom provided by failure to create alternative cultural and academic realms, the areas beside academia rather than within it (2011:7). For Halberstam the intellectual worlds conjured by failure often serve as the launching pad for alternatives precisely when the university and other sociopolitical institutions cannot.

To get these dropout academics started, Halberstam offers low theory as a starting point. Low theory aims low to hit a broader target, in other words to produce theory and research that’s accessible and understandable for many, not just for few. It’s also a theoretical model that flies under the radar, that is” assembled from eccentric texts and examples and that refuses to confirm the hierarchies of knowing that maintain the *high* in high theory”. (2011:16). Low theory is to inform political practice rather than formulate abstract thoughts for the sake of a supposedly neutral philosophical projects. Halberstam names Gramsci, Benjamin and Stuart Hall as theorists supporting low theory-type of praxis.

Halberstam’s low theory is adaptable, shifting, flexible and adjustable. In its open endedness it follows the open pedagogy in the spirit of Paolo Freire and can orient us towards problem-solving knowledge or social visions of radical justice. And this is where Loldiers of Odin comes in, to provide another cultural reference for radical justice and vision of failure.

In *Queer Art of Failure* Jack Halberstam asks if we can find “feminist frameworks capable of recognising the political project articulated in the form of refusal?”(2011:126) For Halberstam the politics of refusal emerges in its most potent form from anticolonial and

antiracist texts (2011:126) and after conducting this research Loldiers of Odin and their activism reads to me as a new antiracist text embedded in refusal and failure. Their direct antiracist action against Soldiers of Odin is based on power play which assumes a certain level of failure: the street patrol is doing their job and clowns are trying to mimic it but fail. They fail because at the end of the day the clowns aren't interested in protecting the streets because they don't share the far-right's fear for the other. In a way, the clowns take on the role of the other and, through better or worse, offer themselves as a target for abuse or arrest.

Like Halberstam's alternative feminist subject, Loldiers of Odin refuse to speak or they speak "wrong". They are the type of subjects who "refuse to cohere; subjects who refuse "being" where being has already been defined in terms of self-activating, self-knowing, liberal subject." (2011:126). Clown harnesses their power from failures, flops and gags. In their world failure is not just a thought process or a feeling, it's an actual visual practice that gently forces the outside world to engage with it.

One might wonder, how do the colourful, eternally happy clowns fit with Halberstam's rather bleak idea of shadow feminisms and negative thinkers as the driving force behind the revolution of failure. Halberstam calls for feminism that doesn't operate in action and momentum, but in the terms of refusal, passivity, unbecoming, unbeing. They call this antisocial-feminism, "a form of feminism preoccupied with negativity and negation". (2011:129). Granted, I struggled with this at first. Negativity and clowning don't usually go well together, which was one of the main reasons I stopped my own clown practice. But one shouldn't forget there's always the dark side of every joke, the dark sense of humour and the question "should I be laughing at this?".

Since the 1980's, Australian clown practitioner and teacher Peta Lily has developed a clown practice she calls "dark clown-the comedy of terrors" (Lily, 2011). When I attended her dark clown course in London, the exercises included torturing your partner through mime and clowns being abducted on a pirate ship and trying to send a video message home to their family. To get us started she told us a story about a professional Jewish clown forced to perform at a concentration camp by hitting his head with a bedpan. Are we having fun yet?

Lily makes it very clear the aim of the dark clown is *not* to ridicule suffering or those who suffer. It is to give the audience and the participants a glimpse of humanity. For a traditional Red Nose Clown this is done through "miffed feelings and shifting allegiances" but in Dark Clown it's about "the horror of stripped dignity" and a way to stop us from numbing-out when facing dreadful events that don't necessarily affect us directly. (Lily, 2011)

Dark Clown can offer what Halberstam calls “a different anarchistic type of struggle” with a new grammar and a new passive voice. So passive in fact, that most dark clowns are totally silent. Their experience and performance truly goes beyond words. If Loldiers of Odin chooses to continue their activism, dark clown as a practice could be a new way forward. As the far-right activism and street patrols seem to be here to stay, the anti-fascist movements requires new approaches, not all of them positive or utopian. Halberstam writes:

For the negative thinkers there are advantages in failing. Relieved from the obligation to smile through chemotherapy and bankruptcy, the negative thinker can use the experience of failure to confront the gross inequalities of everyday life. (2011:4)

Watching someone smile through bankruptcy is like a scene Peta Lily would have written for a dark clown show. The Finnish saying “I don’t know if I should cry or laugh”<sup>4</sup> when faced with something unexpectedly harsh shows that even our vocabulary recognises the close relationship between comedy and tragedy.

Loldiers of Odin already track many territories Halberstam calls for: silence, stubbornness and sacrifice to name just a few. In Loldiers of Odin one can find the type of feminism that instead of trying to save others or to replicate itself, it finds purpose in its own failure. (2011:128). For both Halberstam and Loldiers of Odin it’s about mixing serious with humour, high with low and failure with success. Both have find their place on a queer feminist venn diagram, intersecting with serious subject matter and rebellious, light-hearted methods. Halberstam finishes their book with the following words:

to live is to fail, to bungle, to disappoint, and ultimately to die: rather than searching for ways around death and disappointment, the queer art of failure involves the acceptance of the finite, the embrace of the absurd, the silly and the hopelessly goofy. Rather than resisting endings and limits, let us instead revel in and cleave to all of our own inevitable fantastic failures. (2011:187)

In this chapter I’ve introduced some basic clown theories from gag to profane, and explored the fine line between laughter and terror many clown practitioners walk everyday as a part of their work as clowns and clown theorists. Many of the leading clown theorists agree that whilst many clowns automatically refuse power, it doesn’t automatically refuse them. Through manipulation of illusions and laughter the clown is a powerful figure that can enter the realms others cannot, realms like a torture chamber, far-right torch march or the queens bed, and still be able to play. It’s the willingness to play and fail that seem to make clowns almost untouchable, a powerful position Loldiers of Odin has used as a tactic in their

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<sup>4</sup> “En tiedä pitäiskö tässä itkee vai nauraa” (own translation)

activism. I argue that Loldiers of Odin are true queer artists of failure, challenging our expectations and cultural norms through gags and play.

### **3. Failure as a Tool in Activism**

In this chapter I take a closer look at Loldiers of Odin's interventions which fall on the spectrum of anarchistic, anti-capitalist and feminist activism. I read Emma Goldman's legacy as an anarchist activist of her time and her essays on anarchism and modern drama in conjunction with Loldiers of Odin's intervention tactics. By using Clare Hemming's *Considering Emma Goldman- Feminist Political Ambivalence & Imaginative Archive* (2018) as my guide to modern takes on Goldman, I demonstrate how through the creative application of passion, ambivalence and panache Loldiers of Odin meets Emma Goldman at an anarchistic intersection.

Goldman's views on anarchism also provides a starting point for a short, deeper engagement with Soldiers of Odin and far right street patrols as another type of performing force; a force of masculine nature. Though only a brief stop in critical masculinity studies this chapter lays down some groundwork for future articles and research on the subject around failure, provocation and masculinities in relation to the certain far right movements.

I also look at Karen Goaman's and clown practitioner Hilary Ramsden's work on carnival and anti-capitalist performance based activism in the UK in early 2000's. I show that despite their original setting and unique goals, Loldiers of Odin actually joins a long continuum of clown activists who's approach, scale and opponents change in time, yet the key tactics used during their interventions hold huge similarities including some interpretations of parody, provocation, carnival and failure.

#### **3.1 Emma Goldman: the first rebel clown?**

Emma Goldman (1869-1940) was a political activist and thinker known for her work on anarchism. For the last decade Goldman's writings and activist persona have gathered new steam amongst today's thinkers, activists and media outlets. From Judith Butler to The Guardian, Emma Goldman's value as a political theorist and as an early modern revolutionist is brought up again and again (Hemmings, 2018:1-2). Like for many others, the famous misquoted story about revolution and dancing<sup>5</sup> was the one that lead me to Goldman.

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<sup>5</sup> The famous "If I can't dance it's not my revolution" is not a direct quote of Goldman's. Rather it's the t-shirt worthy essence of a quote "I want freedom, the right to self-expression, everybody's right to beautiful, radiant

However, since then I've found more grounds to use Goldman's writings on anarchism and especially its relation to modern drama as a starting point to explore Loldiers of Odin as today's anarchists and Goldman as a queer feminist, and even a clown activist, of her day. In the following chapter I'd like to go as far as suggesting that Goldman was the first anarchist clown who, most likely unintentionally, applied various clowning tricks into her activism thus raising the awareness, and publicity, around anarchism as a movement.

In the last chapter of her book on Goldman, Hemmings "occupies a position of an imaginative historian" (2018:35) by creating an imaginative archive of letters she wrote as Goldman as a response to Almeda Sperry, a fellow activist and union organiser. Sperry's letters to Goldman actually exist, including her struggles with her work, husband and undeniable desire for Goldman. Hemmings takes these sixty letters and in longing for evidence of mutual queer desire, imagines Goldman's responses in imaginary letters to Sperry. This approach leans on postcolonial fiction and theory which has had to fill in the gaps of their own story. (Hemmings, 2018)

Hemmings writes that "in seeking to fill the gaps, we run the risk of plastering over the cracks of meaning and struggle that are not only a failure to come into recognition but also a legacy of the difficulty of struggle and meaning making." (2018: 32-33). As I've discussed previously in this thesis, the queer art of failure is about to existing in the cracks and gaps of society and draw attention to them by the default of simply being there. Encouraged by Hemmings who imagines Emma Goldman as a queer woman and a feminist icon to further her argument and to bring new relevance to Goldman's writings, I would like to imagine Goldman as a clown activist for similar reasons.

I recognize that the common ground between Emma Goldman and Loldiers of Odin as clown comrades is not self-evident, but by using Hemming's modern take on understanding and responding to Goldman, their similarities between Goldman and LoO in activism can be summed up in three words: *passion*, *ambivalence* and *panache*. What made Goldman memorable amongst anarchists of the time and earned her the nickname "the most dangerous woman in America" was her calculated strategy to promote anarchism through her own persona (Hemmings, 2018). To use today's capitalist lingo, Emma Goldman branded herself as the advocate of anarchy. She wasn't just writing about anarchism, she was actively doing it and performing it; according to Hemmings Goldman's lectures were like a piece of

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things." which she stated in a letter as response to a criticism towards her dancing which apparently wasn't suitable for an agitator. (Collins, 2018)



political theatre with props and scenes of chaining herself onto various sized podiums. Her performances combined her celebrity status with politics and were so lively and popular she was offered a place in vaudeville. Suddenly Loldiers of Odin with their balloon fish and tv-studio takeovers doesn't seem so far away from Goldman who also stuffed rags into her mouth to demonstrate censorship in front of a riled up audience. (Hemmings, 2018: 3)

Arguably many today's activists and influencers, anarchist or otherwise, owe a great deal to Goldman who was one of the first to use her own personal brand to influence her cause. Today the causes vary and the platforms exists more often online, but tying a charismatic, famous persona onto a cause has very much become a mainstream practice in many types of activism. Activists like Munroe Bergdorf combines her trans-activism with modelling, tv-appearances and huge online following. Greta Thunberg has become the face of climate activism with almost a million followers on Twitter. Social media and modelling contracts are today's vaudeville Emma Goldman was invited to join. It personifies often big, complicated causes and encapsulates them into a person, an activist or an influencer.

This type of activism relies on individual's *passion*: creative, charismatic people and their willingness and savvy to use themselves as the mouthpiece to further their cause. This comes, both in the case of Loldiers of Odin and Goldman, with a price: the activists become a visible target for authorities and the opposition and they find themselves lacking in credibility in the eyes of more serious and less passionate political theorists and activists. Loldiers has avoided this by performing anonymously and refusing any "serious" platform to speak, unless they perform an intervention like in the case of Yle Aamu TV-interview. Yet dismissal has been a technique through which Goldman's contributions as a serious political theorist have been disregarded (Hemmings, 2018: 3, see Weiss and Kensinger 2007). However it is this exact passion, creativity and the willingness to show up as a figurehead of anarchism that lends Goldman and her personal brand so freely yet acutely to the disposal of new generation of activists.

Loldiers of Odin and Emma Goldman are also connected through certain *ambivalence*. Hemmings claims is this ambivalence and Goldman's *failure* to answer the questions she herself kept asking about life, politics and difference. For Hemmings, Goldman's unapologetic ambivalence and willingness to speak without holding any definite answers is an invitation to sit in our discomfort, "engage in the struggle over what inequality is and how best to intervene to transform it". Facing one's shortcomings and sitting with them in the moment, even playing with them, is textbook clown behaviour. This type of activist ambivalence is radical, is feminist and it's also incredibly queer. In the midst of all this

Hemmings asks what type of tools can we use to understand and research our ambivalent queer pasts and make use of them today: “How can political ambivalence be animated to ameliorate rather than increase inequality, and how will a critic or audience know the difference?” (2018: 6).

My answer is: performative clown activism. During the juxtaposed political discussion about immigration and far right vigilantes, Loldiers of Odin produced a narrative of ambivalence that is so over the top it almost does a full circle, returning us back to the core of the struggle we face today about difference and inequality. Clown can animate political ambivalence without being threatening or to increase inequality. Critics and the audience will know the difference because, well: it’s a clown, a visibly different, a character. I’d argue that Goldman’s example and thinking have found a new vessel in clown activism which like Goldman herself manages to inhabit their ambivalence with a certain *panache*: self-assured in their ambivalence yet unwavering in their fearlessness. This attitude brings Loldiers of Odin and Emma Goldman closer together than I ever thought would be possible.

Which circles back to passion and the reason why I am using Goldman in my thesis about clown activism. I have no shame in admitting that I originally only used Goldman because she and her writing was available. Through the ages she still lends herself as a figurehead and a stepping stone to deeper thinking, a go-to theorist and activist about anything to do with anarchism. Turns out, in my own ambivalence I ended up much closer to the core of the original question about difference than I thought I would, simply by using Goldman. She also turned out to be a clown activist herself, ready to take her place once again, even through the ages. To quote Hemmings in length to sum up my reasoning (as I couldn’t possibly make Emma Goldman sound any more clown-like than sitting in a catapult):

It is not just our own need for Goldman that catapults her across the ages to take her place as an exemplar of passionate radicalism, then, but her self-fashioning as an available figure in this dynamic. (2018: 5)

### **3.2 Emma Goldman, modern drama and Loldiers of Odin**

Emma Goldman has written a passionate essay about modern drama and how the art form is in her opinion “the strongest and most far-reaching interpreter of our deep-felt dissatisfaction” (1969: 241). From this essay I found a place of thought that resonated with my research on Loldiers of Odin’s performative activism and how that can be linked with Goldman’s broader thinking on anarchism and social justice. She writes how art, literature

and drama can manifest the larger phases of human expression in ways that are harder to ignore than just political discontent and unrest;

But when the dumb unrest grows into conscious expression and becomes almost universal, it necessarily affects all phases of human thought and action, and seeks its individual and social expression in the gradual transvaluation of existing values.” (1969: 241)

Loldiers of Odin not only use performance and drama in their interventions as a tool to affect thoughts and actions. They use failure and parody to turn these thoughts and actions upside down, in other words to “queer” them. This adds another layer onto their activism, which also protects their anonymity; by performing a role of a clown they can distance the carnival from themselves and instead draw attention to the universal cause and creative method instead of their identities, not to mention protecting their personal identities from the far-right.

Many activists often cover their faces when participating in public demonstrations. This is to protect their anonymity against the opposition and the police, but also allows the media to separate the actual people from the cause and create roles for the participant to play. Multiple Finnish news outlets like to juxtapose far right with Black Block-type violent anarchism, especially when reporting on annual Independence Day demonstrations. When political activism as a whole is sold to us as a false spectrum with two violent ends of left and right, the twisted media representation of the demonstrations can turn into looking like a violent encounter between hooded white, able-bodied men on both sides with the white, able-bodied masculine presenting police officers in the middle. This is often very far from the true diversity of anarchist and anti-fascist demonstrations, but the power of representation is that Palestinian scarves and balaclavas creates a very different narrative than a group of clowns playing tambourines.

Groups like Loldiers of Odin play an important role in diversifying the idea of anti-fascist activism by presenting a nonviolent, humorous approach which is still eye-catching to the media. Loldiers makes activism into a piece of street theatre. In comparison to Spain or France or even the UK, Finland hasn’t got a very rich heritage of street performance. Music and dance is more often performed in public places like market squares and street corners but theatre and performance mostly exist in theatre spaces, whether indoors or outdoors during summer season. This might also work for Loldiers’ favour as they expose people to something they haven’t been used to seeing in public places. It catches people off-guard and buys the activists time to either move to another location or engage further and perform their agenda. Think it’s very important that creative performance activists like Loldiers continue to

march in demonstrations as they have the superpower of defusing otherwise potentially threatening situations.

By analysing a long list of modern plays, many of which have now become classics in the dramatic canon, Goldman reinforces the argument that (modern) drama can influence radical thought, to “rouse the consciousness of the oppressed” (1969: 250). She calls Henrik Ibsen “the supreme hater of all social shams” who has torn the veil of hypocrisy from the society’s face. (1969: 253). She also praises Frank Wedekind, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and Chekhov on their efforts for trying to have a social, sometimes even a revolutionary, discussion through drama. Time has turned Goldman’s then modern, revolutionary dramas into a canon of classics. The constant remakes of these plays raise questions about the canonisation of art the power dynamic it possesses, yet drama and performance remain as a medium which, especially outside the traditional theatre spaces, still holds anarchistic potential. *Loldiers of Odin* is an example of this.

The makers of theatre, its context and the plays’ sociopolitical weight change over time. These days theatre, especially big production houses creating big budgeted productions of canonised classics of long-dead white European male writers, is often seen as a form of entertainment for the elite where during the interval a hundred year old social issue can be argued to still reflect the society we live in today. I join the director Saara Turunen on her opinion she expressed in an interview with *Helsingin Sanomat*, on remakes of the likes of Chekhov and Dostoyevsky. Turunen states that without an engaging, critical conversation around these plays and about the image of women and working classes these plays portray, they are not worth producing anymore. Turunen says she’ll rather go to the beach than watch yet another play where women serve tea and coffee. (Laari, 2019) I agree, but instead of the beach, I rather join a demonstration; the powers of modern drama Emma Goldman so passionately laid out over hundred years ago can be seen shifting and moving to the streets. The anarchism in theatre has found a new outlet in the likes of *Loldiers of Odin* and other activists who combine their political activism with elements of drama, performance and street theatre. I reckon Goldman with her own rag and podium stunts would welcome this transition.

### **3.3 Circus has been in town: a short history of performative clown activism in Europe**

*Loldiers of Odin* is not the first group of activists to use clowning as a tool to expose and ridicule the opposition. Since the medieval carnivals there has been this notion of

“temporality” and ‘inversion’ – the momentary exchange of roles. For one day the king played the fool and the people danced around in the king’s clothes. The expansion of London through immigration in 1580’s, Parisian post-war trauma in the 1870’s, Suffragette movement around 1900 and practically the whole history of Soviet Union from the revolution to perestroika in the 1980’s has included forms of clown activism or intervention (Davison, 2013: 310)<sup>6</sup>. In the UK the tradition of Rabelais’s carnival lives on in the May Day demonstrations. The anti-capitalist activist groups such as Anarchist Travelling Circus have in the past given a statue of Winston Churchill a green turf mowhak, thus “degrading” him from ‘states-man’ to ‘punk’ (Goaman, 2018: 169).

During the 2002 May Day meander by the Anarchist Travelling Circus, multiple cars were turned over – to reclaim the public space from capitalism and its symbols like cars. The various fancy dress, the inflatable balls and toys and cardboard armours connote play, inverting the roles of consumer and the stereotypes of ‘powerful bureaucrat with suit’ (Goaman, 2018: 171). It’s important to note here a difference between violence and vandalism. Since the medieval carnivals, vandalism, a damage to property, has been part of the premise of challenging the ruling class. A practice that during the modern times has been adopted by anti-establishment activists, especially when attacking against capitalism. This does not mean the same as violence, which is harm towards other living things. Though some anti-authoritarian movements support and organise violent interventions especially towards the far right and I recognise their active existence, these movements are not present in this thesis. I choose to focus on creative, non-violent activism and groups who, according to my research and knowledge have also avoided vandalism and focused on civil disobedience and reclaiming public spaces. As it is fitting to Loldiers of Odin as clown activists, I refer to their mild law breaking as mischief as it carries the similar light-hearted whaff of unpredictability as the clown as an activist.<sup>7</sup>

Carnival and its mischief and the activism that goes with it, is about failing to meet the expectations of an orderly demonstration, reinvent the terms and conditions and laugh at the face of capital. According to Karen Goaman the carnival “challenges more deeply the routines of power and the use of space. The disruption of the routine of modern existence is a moment in which ‘the familiar is defamiliarised’”. (2018: 171). Long list of examples of

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<sup>6</sup> For more detailed history of clowns and clowning and clown politics, especially detailed take on Grock and Slava the Clown in the Soviet Union, look at “Clown” by Jon Davison (2013)

<sup>7</sup> How Loldiers of Odin chooses to interact with Soldiers of Odin I will later refer to as sabotage.

carnival in protest within the last 20 years mainly in the UK that Karen Goaman best describes as a combination of street theatre, festival and non-violent warfare (2018: 171) include such groups as Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (UK), The Revolutionary Anarchist Clowns (UK), Anarchist Travelling Circus (UK), Tute Bianche (ITA) and London Wombles (UK).

Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army or CIRCA was an activist group active in the UK in the early 2000's. Their methods are the ones closest to Loldiers of Odin, though in my research I haven't found any direct link between the groups. Hilary Ramsden, one of the first clown facilitators at CIRCA is still an active speaker and an academic and her work as well as CIRCA's is widely available and documented. CIRCA was created by activist John Jordan who, after being active in reclaim the streets movement throughout 1980's and 1990's started looking for new ways to subvert the authority and raise awareness. He saw a lot of burnt out activists and was inspired to find new strategies that would be as effective but would also somehow contribute towards the activists' self-care.(Bim Mason, 2017)

Influenced by clowns like Angela de Castro and Baz Kershaw's work that was putting them against the authority whilst remaining fun and carnivalesque, Jordan teamed up with clown practitioner Hilary Ramsden to create a collective, collaborative clown army. In 2003 Ramsden devised a two-day training programme on what they called rebel clowning, aiming to teach activists to clown. The rebel clown became a combination of bouffoon and clown; the certain spitefulness and collectivity of a bouffoon combined with the naivety and individuality of the clown. According to Ramsden, once the activists learned how not to question every exercise, lightness and fun started to take over and they became silly. This created a certain self-care element of clown activism; the participants played and made fun of the authority but also themselves. (Bim Mason, 2017)

During G8 Summit in 2005 CIRCA marched dressed as a clown army and interacted directly with the law enforcement present at the demonstration. "We told them; we will help you to secure the streets, we will help you to secure the buildings! We aligned ourselves with them" Ramsden remembers (Bim Mason, 2017). She counts how communicating with single police officers, physically but non-violently touching police officers and making them smile felt revolutionary and new at the time. For CIRCA is wasn't so much about provocation but to defuse already a high intensity situation through laughter and play. The technique was effective and was gaining a lot of attention: for a while CIRCA and their programme was regarded such a threat that an undercover police officer went through their rebel clown training. (Bim Mason, 2017)

Rebel clowning has now made a regional comeback in Finland in the form of Loldiers of Odin. Just like CIRCA helped the police to secure the streets, Loldiers is “helping” the far-right street patrols to protect the streets. Arguably the times have changed in that Loldiers are directly aiming for a provocation. If there is an element of defusing, it’s not aimed at Soldiers of Odin or the police whom the activists actively provoke. The potential defusing seems to be aimed at the bystanders and passers-by who might otherwise find the presence of far-right street patrols intimidating or confusing. In their video one clown dressed up as Odin actively establishes physical contact with people on the street by putting their hand up for a high five and acting very pleased and sure of himself if someone spontaneously high fives them back (Loldiers of Odin, 2016).

Around the same time as CIRCA was active, prime minister Tony Blair called another anti-capitalist activists “anarchist travelling circus” originally as an insult to belittle their efforts during May Day demonstrations which included toy catapults and dressing up statues in punk attire. The activists adopted the insult and thus Anarchist Travelling Circus was officially born. Beside the personal identity politics, this is arguably not so different to some LGBT-activists and individuals claiming “queer” as a refuge instead of a slur. Which brings us back to the inner powers of failure; with a logic of a clown, if one volunteers to be made fun of, the bully will lose the power they had over the situation. In other words you go so low no one can put you down. Carnival as a mean to demonstrate holds a similar kind of power but as well as names, the activists operating in the current climate, have had to become even faster and more reactive to stay relevant in the ever changing political landscape which, in its current state often operates like a carnival itself.

In 2010’s the use of clown, carnival and parody have shifted from fancy dressed summit demonstrators to the groups and collectives like Pussy Riot (RUS), Tutti Fruittii (UK) and Loldiers of Odin for whom the inverted space expands from the urban streets to churches, hair salons and TV-studios. The new clowns are taking their fight straight to the powerful bureaucrat with suit, and in their case also with the bible, the scissors and the microphone. This gains more immediate, wider-spread visibility and has even stronger, longer-lasting effect. The clown activism is no longer just about challenging the opposition and providing solace to the like-minded but also to engage with the bystanders in order to disturb or to change their opinions.

When the groups like CIRCA opposed the political elite, the army and the “system” as whole, the new wave of clown activists are more specific in their fights and detailed to what they react to. In the case of Loldiers and Soldiers, neither of them really agree with the

political elite. This in turn creates more questions than I have answers to: what does it say about the Western, in this case Finnish, society today that instead of protesting the government and dressing up statues with grass wigs the activists have to use their limited resources to shield bystanders from far-right street patrols? Does this juxtapositioning actually help the elite and the bureaucrats to get away with indirect murder by deportations and climate change whilst the media and audience attention is on nazis and clowns?

### **3.4 Loldiers of Odin failing in action: Helsinki without Nazis 2016**

It's important to note that Helsinki without Nazis was a different outing for Loldiers of Odin. Instead of following the street patrols, the clowns took on a leading role during Helsinki without Nazis (HwN) demonstration on 6th of December 2016. The role was different to the one of the provocateur parodying the far-right in Tampere. Knowing that a large group of far-right activists and neo-nazis were marching on the other side of the city centre and that their route was going to collide with HwN counter protest, the clowns adapted a tactic that reminded me of the approach of CIRCA: more comforting and interactive towards the counter protestors providing them with a loud and bright visual representation. The speeches they gave and games we played together and just their overall carnivalesque presence created a warmer atmosphere in otherwise tense and potentially threatening situation. For Loldiers this demonstrators wasn't about provocation or changing the views of others. It was about providing security and comfort to the other activists marching with them.

In her essay "The anarchist travelling circus: reflections on contemporary anarchism, anti-capitalism and the international scene" (2004) Karen Goaman writes about the significance of space and the power it holds to control a space. According to Goaman anti-capitalist movement reclaims power by contesting these spaces, both materially and symbolically:

We find ourselves in these built-up urban spaces or deserted agricultural monocultures, alienated from each other and the natural world which has been sanitised or concreted over. This is the visible world we inhabit, and it is the 'defamiliarisation' and breaking open of these routinised ways of life which is so significant about contemporary protest strategies. (2004: 169)

Breaking open the routinised ways of life could just as easily be called failing at the routinised way of life. According to Jon Davison, clown can't be a political being because for a clown everything is supposedly a game. Clown doesn't take anything seriously and this includes morality; if a clown would join an actual military army they would be too distracted



by the shiny buttons of their uniform to focus on the task. For traditional theatre clowns who have trained in techniques of LeCoq, are too inconsistent and too naive to understand the consequences of their actions to participate in political activism. (Davison, 2012)

Playing with these characteristics of a clown arguably makes rebel clowning such an affective form of activism; by putting on the colourful clown outfit the activist frees themselves from the expectations and set themselves up to fail. Climbing statues whilst wearing a bright pink wig and waving a massive balloon fish on a stick instead of a flag is like a living parody of an anti-fascist activist. In this context Loldiers is using the tools of parody on the activists around them to create a shared experience of laughter and self-awareness.

Goaman writes how reclaiming spaces through play is more often than not met with bemusement and curiosity rather than hostility by the onlookers and bystanders (2004). It brings people together in a space, in this case an anti-fascist march on a cold December afternoon, that would otherwise have a strong chance to fall apart and scatter. There is something captivating about watching Loldiers of Odin in action, their frantic running and jumping (you should never run when marching, absolute failure!) and their made up instructions they are shouting at whoever happens to be at ear-shot. Through their failing actions they are reclaiming and queering the space we inhabit while marching which in turn creates a sense of togetherness and safety.

Bim Mason argues (2017) that when witnessing or celebrating someone breaking rules, that's anti-authoritarian act in itself. As we march along seeing and feeling the impact of the clowns we become more rebellious by proxy: yes, the actions of the clowns encourages us to keep on marching, providing a (somewhat false) sense of safety but there's also the level of empowering failure. Loldiers are our representatives of rebellion and through them we who march with them, laugh at them and interact with them are all failing to meet the standardised norms of an angry anti-fascist demonstrator.

This same superpower of failure allows Loldiers of Odin to include a nazi salute as a part of a nursery rhyme they sing with us as we wait to start the march. Imagine the change in the atmosphere and style of activism if the song would have been performed by a white able-bodied cis man in a black hoodie. First of all we wouldn't have been able to hear the singing because his face would have been covered by a palestine scarf but more importantly the symbolic action of his nazi salute would have conveyed a very different message. The power of clowning lies in the ability to enter the realm of taboos and return to us in one piece. Like Bim Mason says: clowns are life affirming because they can't die, they fail but they always

bounce back. Since the times of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin the clown has been a symbol of the little person, the underdog. The world might be falling apart, in the case of Keaton's films this was often literal with hurricanes and falling buildings, the clown always survives. Maybe this is why we find it comforting to see clowns at political demonstrations. As a symbol of failure, but also of survival.

In this light anti-capitalist and anti-globalisation movements seem a very natural habitat for clowns. With their commitment to non-hierarchical organisation, symbolic action and carnival, and their direct action, both clowns and anti-capitalists are highly visible examples of anarchism in action. (Maison, 2016: 179) Anarchistic carnivals and anti-fascist demonstrations like HwN are good places for clown activism because they are contained and temporary yet less contained than organised carnivals or demonstrations. Operating slightly outside the world of officialdom allows Loldiers to react in the moment and keep their interventions surprising and fresh. This is important because even after marching with Loldiers for couple of hours their routine started to repeat itself and was getting slightly boring. When instead of provoking the clowns are entertaining, their interventions clearly benefit from a short time span and multiple performers with different characters too keep up the atmosphere and enhance the element of surprise. When following Soldiers of Odin, the ongoing singing and dancing is a power move and a way to provoke: we keep going as long as you keep going.

### **3.5 From international tricksters to local clowns: the changing scale of clown activism**

The scale of Loldiers of Odin's activism is interesting to consider. Often in activism focused around marches, interventions and demonstrations the bigger is considered better. The bigger the media coverage or the amount of people turning up, the better the demonstration. Large, international summits still attract big groups of anti-capitalist and anarchistic demonstrators who wish to break through the apathy by highlighting the urgency of their cause by turning up where the eyes of the world are already turned. Loldiers of Odin are in comparison a very local and reactive group of activists. Would their approach even work during a larger, international summit action and mass movements? Could they become new CIRCA and march as a rebel clown army?

It's challenging to separate Loldiers' activism from its local, extremely Finnish context. A group of clown activists following a street patrol patrolling the empty streets of Tampere in the middle of the darkest January has the local edge you can't bottle for

international consumption. In their media presence and interviews they remind me of an alternative Finnish sketch group with their jokes based on wordplay and remarks on local political jargon. Loldiers' charm lies in its site-specificity, but it doesn't mean their activism can't have an international appeal; via YouTube and online news outlets their interventions have received a wide attention. They also stay true in the spirit of the clown in that they don't seem to have a clear agenda or an open interest to develop their activism further. The group exists to challenge the rise of the far-right street patrols in Finland and whenever needed, they will emerge.

Maybe the anarchistic, anti-globalisation movement Goaman speaks so fondly of will have to start applying their ideals of locality into their activism more directly. As the political landscape gets more divided and complicated so do the causes the activists tackle. Maybe the time of large summit actions is over. Many of today's millennial left-wingers growing up in the world after 9/11 have grown disheartened by the lack of effect the mass demonstrations seem to have in the global politics and decision making. Climate Summits produce nothing but dead ends and the UK and US go to war in Iraq despite one of the largest demonstrations in the history organised by Stop the War Coalition. Not to mention that the urge to centre anti-capitalist activism so strongly around large international demonstrations, rallies and marches is an ableist practice excluding people who can't participate due to a physical, mental or financial barriers. Locally operating grassroots groups like Loldiers of Odin and Tuttii Fruittii can create a following online to the point of someone becoming foolish enough to try and write a master's thesis about them.

If the summit demonstrations fail, clowns are not only the first to celebrate the failure but the first to start fantasising and creating different anarchistic utopias. I'm not arguing that everyone should become a clown or a clown activist or a rebel clown to better aid their subjective causes. But I hope I have demonstrated that clowning, either as a practice or theoretical method in activism, is a useful tool. It teaches us how to stay in the moment and how to embrace failure in a way that instead of making us feel small, it highlights the importance of our struggle within our shortcomings. Clowning can help defuse an aggressive situation during a demonstration and diversify the public image of anarchist and anti-fascist activism by making it more approachable and accessible

## 4. Failure as a Feminist Space

After looking at Loldiers of Odin's provocation in the light of comedy theory and as a tool in activism, it is time to break down what makes their work and their use of failure feminist. I start with feminine refusal as tactic to exist outside the ruling norm, moving on to gaga feminism and how to make failing work on one's favour and empowerment. I finish with abjection as an in-between space that in its ambiguity respects no borders or rules. Like Loldiers of Odin in their activism, abjection breaks down both physical and metaphysical borders. I use these multitudes as building blocks to create a feminist space based on failure as an act of radical refusal. Whether to do with the feminine refusal like Hélène Cixous, gaga feminism like Jack Halberstam or abjection like Julia Kristeva, they all reach out towards the unknown to question and challenge the status quo. In other words, to react.

Failure as a feminist space or location celebrates refusal, queer and horror. Three things that link to my readings of Loldiers of Odin as radical ways to challenge the norm and carry on existing despite of it. I demonstrate that Loldiers of Odin can be seen in their ethos and action as a feminist activist group, without focusing on the activists themselves.

### 4.1 Care-giving clowns giving no fucks: refusal of the patriarchal order

By applying Cixous's "women's writing", a style of writing and performance for women by women "bearing the mark of our time" and refusing to be defined by patriarchal, violent past (1976: 875-876) I explore the connection between Cixous's classic feminist text and Loldiers of Odin's actions. Cixous's essay simultaneously celebrates women as creative and revolutionary beings who's "imaginary is inexhaustable" and "stream of phantasm incredible" (1976: 876), whilst refusing the idea of a typical or universal idea of a "woman". As an anti-masculine deed, *The Laugh of the Medusa* refuses to define women doing women's writing, instead focusing on the individual richness and uniqueness of their voices and the potential of women's writing as a counter force for normative rules. Women's writing thus becomes more about what it isn't (patriarchal, orderly and violent) than what it actually is.

What makes Loldier's of Odin's provocation so effective is the similar approach: ambivalent and unpredictable style. The nature of their activism is best described as loud, chaotic and reactive. Both Cixous and Loldiers embrace failure, or falling outside the normative expectations, as a triumph and proof that the expectation itself must be crooked.

Loldiers' provocation is, in relation to Cixous's essay, a feminist form of creative activism which is an effective way to challenge existing power structures.

The character of a clown can be a genderless, white faced tabula rasa supposedly freed from any preconceptions like in Lecoq (Davison, 2013), or a carnevalistique gender hybrid (Halberstam, 2012) or anything in between. Some traits of traditional Auguste, or red nose clown, can be spotted in their work. According to clown theorist Jon Davison, Auguste has no past or future. They live like children, enjoying the moment and loving their audience but getting distracted by all the interesting things around them (2013). Very much like Loldiers who play in the snow, fall over, sing...this way *failing* their mission to patrol the streets with Soldiers of Odin. In this sense I wouldn't count on Loldiers of Odin to be the activists to lead us towards a queer, anarchistic utopia; for a clown only the present matters and what happens in the future, no matter how lovely, is always out of their realm.

Almost like following the example set by Cixous in her essay, the clowns have forsaken the "obsession to dominate the way things work - knowing "how it works" in order to "make it work" . Loldiers is not taking over and carnivalising concepts such as a street patrol, tv-interview or a demonstration "in order to internalise or manipulate, but rather to dash through and fly" (1976:887). Loldiers are focusing on talking nonsense or telling the audience stories about love and animals, and how nice it'd be if everyone would just get along (Petozzi, 2016). According to them, they're not on the streets to distract the street patrols but simply because they too want to join in the fun patrolling mission. Once again Cixous's Woman is reflected on Loldiers as an ambassador of love in the world controlled by hatred and "fuelled by a duping subservience to the phallus" (1976:893)

Their failure is especially empowering when viewed as a feminist commentary. According to Johanna Oksala "Because the neoliberal subject is a free atom of self-interest fully responsible for navigating the social realm by using cost-benefit calculation, those who fail to succeed can only blame themselves." (Oksala, 2011: 116). Failure is funny but success is serious business. Capitalist success build on the expectation of forever climbing up and rising to the top is the most serious example of this. But as Halberstam points out in "Queer Art of Failure" : "Being taken seriously means missing out on a chance to be frivolous, promiscuous and irrelevant. The desire to be taken seriously is precisely what compels people to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production." (Halberstam, 2011: 6). Failure can be a space that creates the boldest of innovations, and serious success can produce harmful truths.

When it comes to Soldiers of Odin and their far right dogma, through the parodying actions clowns aim to erase that toxic ideology, paint over it, carnevalise it. Cixous looks at Woman when talking about women's writing and wonders/examines/thinks?? why this fearless style of writing will have such an effect. If replacing man with a capitalist and woman with clown, one is close to realising the potential of Loldiers' of Odin's activism: Unlike man, who holds so dearly to his title and his titles, his pouches of value, his cap, crown, and everything connected with his head, woman couldn't care less about the fear of decapitation (or castration), adventuring, without the masculine temerity, into anonymity, which she can merge with without annihilating herself; because she's a giver. (1976:888)

Clowns too are reactive givers, the clown simply can't exist without their audience. For their audience the clown always gives their all, especially their love, regardless of the audience being a child in a circus or a far-right street patrol. This performance of giving and loving in itself can be seen as an anti-capitalist act, as a refusal of possession. It's a powerful comment from Loldiers towards Soldiers of Odin who's vitalistic approach claims ownership over not only space they inhabit but the bodies of women and children they claim to protect.

Loldiers of Odin is like the free spirited Woman of Cixous' essay, a character who can afford to waste and ignore experiences considered worthy and respectable and who "un-thinks the unifying, regulating history that homogenizes and channels forces, herding contradictions into a single battlefield." (1976:882). Loldiers creates a parody of a powerful and intimidating discourse, the rise of the far-right, and from their absurd position are making it...queer. Lead by Loldiers the beginning of the demonstration breaks out from its premeditated mould and is replaced by a silly "rising, insurrectionary dough kneading itself, with sonorous, perfumed ingredients, a lively combination of flying colours, leaves and rivers, plunging into the sea we feed." (Cixous, 1976:889). In other words, the meaning making of Soldiers of Odin, the vitalistic masculinity, the natural order of power and heteronormative behaviours...all of this becomes obsolete in the hands of Loldiers who refuse to recognise the street patrols' toxic dogma. This has the potential to affect a bystander to question Soldiers' actions as it's no longer set in stone.

## **4.2 Loldiers of Odin failing in power**

Hosting the beginning of the Helsinki without Nazis-demonstration the clowns are going through the rules of the march. We're all practising marching together, marching still in front of the stage where Loldiers clowns are cheering us on. Then one of them goes: "when you march, make sure you wave!" and the other continues "But don't stretch your arm from

the neck into the air and march...that's a different type of march!'. Clowns also demonstrate the nazi salute for everyone and people laugh when they carry on "No! None of that here please!". The clowns give an impression that they are playing a role of a demonstration organiser, they're simultaneously very serious and very not convincing in what they're trying to do.

This creates a moment where all the strings are showing and we realise that a bunch of clowns are holding most of them. What a fitting revelation and metaphor considering it's the independence day, the elite has been invited to Presidential Palace, police are patrolling the streets and on the other side of the central Helsinki, the far-right and nationalist organisations are starting their own march. What Loldiers decide to do with this given platform of power, is to make the strings into a bow and refuse the responsibility. This juxtaposition, the silliness combined with the extremely serious subject matter, seems to be the thing that provokes most reaction, both for and against the clowns. It is provocative to watch someone with power to just seemingly ignore the fact, or failing to use it.

According to Halberstam "queer artist works with rather than against failure and inhabits the darkness. Indeed the darkness becomes a crucial part of a queer aesthetic" (2011:96) and though nothing essentially connects queer, lesbian, gay or trans people to these forms of unbeing and unbecoming nor am I making any claims of Loldiers of Odin being specifically queer activists I feel like this is an interesting point to make. Especially if we expand the idea of darkness and failure to touch the whole political circumstance these activists, both Loldiers and Soldiers, operate.

Within queer arts, one has learned how to criticise the system whilst avoiding labels and signifiers forced from outside. If need be, one has actively created their own signifiers to replace the old no longer serving their purpose. Through this action many queer artists have opted out (failed?) from conforming and instead created their own rules for an alternative reality. Hélène Cixous is also warning her reader about the outside signifiers of power:

Beware, my friend, of the signifier that would take you back to the authority of a signified! Beware of diagnoses that would reduce your creative powers. "Common" nouns are also proper nouns that disparage your singularity by classifying it into species. Break out of the circles: don't remain within the psychoanalytic closure. Take a look around, then cut through! (1976:892)

Halberstam calls the queer failure a "landscape of confusion, loneliness, alienation, impossibility and awkwardness" (2011:97). This is the part of our world that Loldiers of Odin also highlights by juxtaposing their colourful innocence with the bleakest of backdrops: the

rise of the far right. I argue that by following the street patrols the clowns manage to shift the power dynamic just enough to take the edge off the patrols fear mongering by saying “we are all lonely, confused, alienated and awkward, let’s fail together.”

### **4.3 Loldiers of Odin goes Gaga!**

In their activism, Loldiers of Odin represent a specific type of feminism Jack Halberstam coins as gaga feminism. Using the popstar Lady Gaga as a starting point to describe an anarchic feminist performance movement within feminism, Halberstam entertains a thought of how we can occupy gender and create new forms of belonging from the wreckage of boom/bust economy and nuclear family (2012:xv). Their answer turns out to be Lady Gaga.

Known for their creative use of pop cultural references, Halberstam uses Lady Gaga as an example of what gaga feminism could entail: it is everything to do with but not limited to Lady Gaga, nor it is completely new nor suggested in any way by Lady Gaga herself (2012: xii). Hardly lacking imaginative and playful imagery, Halberstam paints a picture of gaga feminism as the future of feminist activism that reminds me of the work of many current drag artists that goes beyond gender, norms and binary. Halberstam describes gaga feminism as “the feminism of the phony, the unreal and the speculative” (2012: xii), “performance of excess; crazy, unreadable appearances of wild genders and social experimentation” (2012:xiii) and is about “improvisation, customization and innovation” (2012: xiv). In its revolt and whimsical playfulness gaga feminism is closely related to Halberstam’s earlier writings in *Queer Art of Failure* where giving up and opting out are seen as a form of radical queer feminism and anarchy against the system.

In *Gaga Feminism* (2012) Halberstam takes this another step further; in addition to celebrating failure and existence in the margins “this punk or wild feminism hints at a future rather than prescribing one; it opens out onto possibilities rather than naming them; it gestures toward new forms of revolt rather than patenting them.” (2012: xiii). On top of failing and opting out from the norms of family and economy, Halberstam invites the followers of gaga to also opt out from focusing on the future or suggesting alternatives in any particular way other than celebrating fiercely in the moment. Gaga feminism is absolutely not meant to be utilitarian or functional, more utopian and visionary. Like Lady Gaga’s wardrobe.

From patrolling the street patrols dressed in colourful nightgowns and Viking hats to riding hobby horses around a tv-studio whilst doing an interview, Loldiers of Odin’s reactive provocations represent gaga feminism in action. According to Halberstam, these new



movements are no longer satisfied with simply participating in marches or issuing demands. Instead, they “turn politics into performance and combine anarchist mistrust of structure with queer notions of bodily riot and antinormative disruption” (2012:133). Even Halberstam recognises that combining the lack of a clear agenda and the clear belief in the rightness of the cause is an unusual mix. But this combination of whimsy and passive resistance, improvisation and loud refusal, is exactly what makes Loldiers’ provocation so poignant.

As I demonstrated in the chapter on Emma Goldman, ambivalence worked for her, it’s working on Lady Gaga and it’s working on Loldiers of Odin as a common nominator for a new type of personal politics. Failure to even meet the criteria of what is expected of them as an anti-establishment demonstrator makes Loldiers stand out from the anarchistic crowd. Their failure becomes a “location of resisting, blocking, slowing, jamming the economy and the social stability that depends upon it” (2012: 133). Failure as a feminist space or a location, as Halberstam suggests, lends itself for an idea of micro utopia where different rules to the outside world apply.

Both gaga feminism and Loldiers of Odin use the outlandish tactic of nonsense to participate in big and meaningful forms of cultural critique. They find “inspiration in the silly and the marginal, the childish and the outlandish...as we wait for new social forms to give our gaga babbling meaning.” (Halberstam, 2012: xxv) Refusal to give meaning to their actions highlights the notion that it’s neither Loldiers of Odin or gaga feminism that’ll give us answers to the big questions like how to tackle the rise of far-right, climate change or the refugee “crisis”. However, through their ridiculing actions they shine light to the blind spots of the harmful discourses that need to change. Halberstam presents gaga feminism as a “gender politics that recognizes the ways in which our ideas of the normal or the acceptable depend completely upon racial and class-based assumptions about the right and true.”

When commenting on Occupy Wall Street movement philosopher Slavoj Zizek said that “carnivals come cheap” and “what matters is the day after” (Halberstam, 2012: 135). But what is fascinating and beautiful in this current movement is that it actually has come embrace the carnival and baked it into their activism and theory. And thus the outcomes of this resistance won’t necessarily only take shape in well organised TV-interviews, orderly marches and polite academic writings in the days after which for centuries has been the playground of white middle-class intellectual men to take over the market squares, pubs and media outlets and tell the rest of us how we should act moving forward. It’s good carnivals come cheap as the people fighting the fight can’t afford much. But many of us know how to turn a party. Maybe our future is decided on the streets while dancing as they might also be

decided upon by “the process of dissent, refusal and carnivalesque failure.” (Halberstam, 2012: 135).

#### **4.4 Abjection: Loldiers occupying the In-between**

As this is a sub-chapter in a gender studies thesis about clowns, from the point of view of a personal failure I really have nothing to lose and everything to gain. This is why I dare to take the idea of abjection and play with it a little bit. I’m interested to explore the abjection as a twisted in-between space that allows rebellious clowning to take place and produce laughter which in turn can be seen as cathartic. I’m not focusing here on the psychoanalytical side of abjection but “if one imagines (and imagine one must, for it is the working of imagination whose foundations are being laid here)” (Kristeva, 1982: 5) abjection compliments my queer feminist reading on Loldiers of Odin in a way that provides new ways of thinking about especially the unease their clown presence has created in Soldiers of Odin, bystanders and the media.

As a carnivalesque, well-known pop-culture reference of gaga feminism, Halberstam offers Lady Gaga’s famous meat dress she wore at MTV Video Music Awards in 2010:

When Lady Gaga wears a meat dress or five-inch heels, she does so to call attention to the whimsy of personhood, the ways in which we all need to see each other anew, find new surfaces, name those surfaces differently, and confuse the relation between surface and depth. (2012: 26)

For Julia Kristeva, abjection lies at the crossroads of phobia, obsession, and perversion (1982: 69). Arguably, this is a similar place where still many queer activists and artists can find themselves represented, if not by them and their peers then by media and the public. When talking about abjection’s relation to perversion, Kristeva’s essay hits some queer notes. The abject doesn’t assume any rule or law but instead turns them aside, misleads and corrupts them (1982: 15). These are all ways in which, when applied to activism, one can begin to question and to queer ideas of normal and acceptable. According to Halberstam, embracing your perversion can become a sign of strength allowing you to redefine societal and cultural norms. In Kristeva’s essay, “apparently victorious” masculine is threatened by “that other sex”, the feminine. Kristeva argues that masculine finds feminine threatening because of its asymmetrical, irrational, wily uncontrollable power. In terms of Loldiers of Odin, this brings feminine, failure, clown and queer together in their activism.

It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. *What does not respect borders, positions, rules.* The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. (1982: 4)

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva not only talks about bodily fluids and decaying body as a source of horror but the less concrete feeling of uncertainty, crossing and breaking both physical and metaphorical borders. It is this multi-use of borders that caught my attention in relation to *Loldiers of Odin*. Through their activism, the clowns don't only explore the boundary between order and chaos which is constantly present in their interactions with both the street patrols and the police. They also bring to focus the literal borders the refugees have had to cross only to be faced with more fear, hate and racism when arriving to Finland. These literal borders can represent similar things Kristeva describes in her essay;

as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. (1982)

To cross physical borders to get away from death and decay has been reality for many of the refugees arriving to Finland. The problem rises when the public discourse fails to recognise them as anything more but a passive sum of their trauma or a threat to "the Finnish way of life". It's easy to see *Soldiers of Odin* and the rise of far right as threatening, but *Loldiers of Odin* are also problematic in their own way. This way includes white privilege, saviourism and speaking for a minority.

For Kristeva, abjection lives for juxtaposition and exists on the dark side of one's psyche. It relates to the immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady side of the mind. Amongst other colourful metaphors, she calls abjection "a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you.\*". (1982: 4). Without wanting to make *Loldiers* sound like Stephen King's "It", their activism possesses the risk of becoming the hatred that smiles or a friend who stabs you. Being an anonymous clown activist is a privileged position provided by the perks of anonymity and part-time work. They don't need to be on-call or visible all the time, they can choose their battles. Here lies the risk of lazy white feminist activism that ends up as a conscious cleaning exercise for the activists and fails to tackle the structural inequality these racially charged issues stem from.

*Loldiers of Odin* is walking a fine line between provocative and offensive and their actions and interventions have the real risk of belittling a serious topic and making fun of real people's real fears and traumas. However, an argument can also be made that they are harnessing their own privilege and fearlessness as outsiders so that others who are more personally at risk don't have to. Anonymous part-time activism which is reactive by nature

allows the activists to rest and opt-out. Loldiers have managed to dodge the white saviour bullet most of the time by focusing their provocation efforts solely on Soldiers of Odin and the far right and the hatred their patrolling creates, instead of bringing any more attention to the refugees. Except that they do. Because as much as the Finnish public discourse would like to write it off as an incident or a “wave”, Loldiers themselves point out that when talking about immigration we’re not talking about an issue but a group of people (Petozzi, 2016). And those people are forever present everytime Loldiers performs.

We are back at the intersection with Soldiers, Loldiers and the refugees, and there’s another border there. A metaphysical place Kristeva counts as the home of abjection. This time the border is built between order and chaos. Both Soldiers and Loldiers can be regarded as the creators of their own type of chaos. Soldier of Odin are creating chaos through vitalistic performance of aggressive power, pushing their far-right agenda veiled as protecting women, children and “the Finnish way of life”, threatened by the chaos they imagine the immigration causes. Meantime, Loldiers of Odin are performing love and acceptance through provocation, sabotage and civil disobedience. Previously I problematised the elements of chaos the refugees have witnessed or created themselves, and it boils down to morals.

For Kristeva, a medieval carnival was a space where usually extremely strict moral control was loosened thus allowing things like sexual matters to emerge (1982: 205). Going against the moral code is an effective provocation, as people’s morals are often varied and, if not taken to the extreme, not restricted by law. Toying with the right and wrong is the skill enhanced by many performing provocateurs. By creating a carnivalesque atmosphere around the street patrol, Loldiers are creating a juxtaposition that makes both the bystanders and the participants to question the ongoing power play. From this confusion, laughter can emerge.

In her essay Kristeva talks about laughter that is “neither jovial, nor trustful, nor sublime, nor enraptured by preexisting harmony. It is bare, anguished, and as fascinated as it is frightened” (1982: 205). She coins the term “laughing apocalypse” to describe a space beyond Religion, Morality and Law where such fascinated yet frightened laughter resides. According to Kristeva

A laughing apocalypse is an apocalypse without god. Black mysticism of transcendental collapse. The resulting scription is perhaps the ultimate form of a secular attitude without morality, without judgment, without hope. (1982: 206)

Looking at Loldiers of Odin in the light of laughing apocalypse, it brings the practice closer to Peta Lily’s Dark Clown that is not so much about making people laugh but to question is it ok to laugh about this? Why am I laughing?

When one laughs at Loldiers of Odin, who are they actually laughing at? Is it at the clowns themselves who are ridiculing not only themselves but the system in which such activism is being produced. Is it at Soldiers of Odin who, based on their own words (Soldiers of Odin, 2019) feel like the aim of the clowns is to embarrass them or to provoke them until they physically attack the clowns and end up breaking the law. Are we laughing at the refugees? They are only ones who didn't have the luxury to choose a metaphorical border instead of a physical one. Many of them have faced an actual personal apocalypse, fear, loss and death. They have faced countless, real circumstances where morality and hope was disregarded and forgotten. They have collapsed and got back up again only to cross yet another border to be faced with more hate. A global situation, which is completely out of their control has created a circumstance where different groups of privileged white activists and far right agitators in a tiny Northern country are provoked for and by them. They are the only real risk-takers in this scenario, yet they are cast out from the public debate surrounding them. Just like they were cast out from this thesis, this is my failure.

In this chapter I present Loldiers of Odin as a queer feminist activist group. Considering failure as a feminist space or location allows us to broaden our view from the provocative clowns to the power structures they operate against. Through feminine refusal, gaga feminism and abjection Loldiers of Odin occupy a space in between which for many of us is too ambiguous to grasp. Protected by their own rules of carnival morals, clown characters and anonymity these activist can challenge the street patrols and the police by using techniques of failure and refusal that wouldn't be as effective otherwise. Though Loldiers potential possesses a constant risk of white saviourism they have managed many times to draw the attention to the structural difference in power that lies within the racial tension growing in Finland.

Similarly to Halberstam I argue that since the definition of evil is dependent on racial and class-based assumptions, it actually highlights the problems of toxic, heteronormative masculinity more than it describes the feminine. Being described as radical is something that advocates change. Whether it's Lady Gaga wearing a dress made out of meat or an activist dressed as a clown being dragged into a police van as a street patrol watches the arrest from the distance, failure as a feminist space or a location offers temporal freedom outside the societal norms.

Through failure and radical refusal Loldiers of Odin creates space which is key to feminist activism. Just like queer art of failure and gaga feminism, Loldiers of Odin can help us to imagine a utopia where the patriarchal rules have finally been disregarded. Loldiers'

constant play and provocation through and around failure is a radical queer reminder that we should move passed in thinking failure as an individual shortcoming and start to focus on more structural flops in the society. In the words of Jack Halberstam: “There is something powerful in being wrong, in losing, in failing, and that all our failures combined might just be enough, if we practice them well, to bring down the winner”. (2011: 120)

## **5. Conclusion**

Loldiers of Odin’s anti-fascist activism demonstrates failure and the queer aesthetics of success refusal which in turn criticises the power structures of normativity. Thanks to the entertainment value of humour and parody in relation to a serious and topical subject matter, Loldiers’ of Odin has received an enormous coverage in both national and international press. The secret identities of the activists and clown alter-egos are adding up to the media appeal. Loldiers of Odin joins a long continuum of feminist and queer performative activism, where the aesthetics of failure are used to advocate their message and to criticise the system of oppression.

Through the study of Loldiers of Odin I have emerged myself in three different ways of engaging and benefitting from failure. Firstly, I looked at failure as a physical representation of a joke in clown and comedy, as a gag. I problematised the relationship between clowns and power whilst presenting power play and status drops as fundamental techniques of a successful clown. The long history of the clown as a character that can challenge the powerful, the clowns still continue to enter certain realms of society and cultural consciousness others wouldn’t dare. In their naivete, the clown becomes almost immune to fear or morals and just focuses on play and failure. This allows them to approach far-right activists, police and other powerful figures and challenge their existence through humour and physical comedy gags. This becomes a useful tool in Loldiers of Odin’s clown activism.

Secondly, I looked at failure as a tool in Loldiers of Odin’s activism. I argued that the type of activism Loldiers of Odin creates, represents a larger shift in queer feminist and anti-fascist grassroots activism. Operating in a quickly changing landscape of global politics, groups like Loldiers of Odin have moved away from global mass-movements and are focusing instead on acting and failing at a local level. More reactive and local activism is taking hold and due to the possibilities of online presence and reach, attracts a new generation of activists with new ideas and utopias. Clown can act as a facilitator, provocateur or a

comical relief during challenging or hostile political demonstrations but it is also encouraging activists to fail and try again.

Thirdly, I looked at failure as a feminist space or location. Activist clowns with their happiness and urge to fail is arguably not a bad starting point for a queer feminist utopia. Failure can be viewed as a feminist space or a location, providing an incubator and a platform for losers and refuseniks to come together and bask in their failures. This is an ambiguous space, but as I have discussed, clown is happy to inhabit the unknown and the undefined realms, the abject. Through Loldiers of Odin and clown activism the idea of border crossing, both physical and metaphysical, can be accessed and problematised. In the media frenzy surrounding by both Soldiers and Loldiers of Odin, most of the country in its racialised bias is happy to ignore the refugees and asylum seekers as nothing more than a catalyst, a wave or a “crisis”. It’s crucial to remain critical and avoid the urge for white saviourism and the easy road to only include white Finnish people in the conversation about immigration and racism.

Failure is a radical concept and within radicalism comes the change. From the high tower of heteronormative capitalism it might be hard to see our multitudes of queer realities in which we don’t have much to loose since we’ve been already doomed to fail. This game might be rigged, but knowing this can be liberating and encourage us to get comfortable in our failure and use it to generate new ways of thinking and being. These beings welcome discourses like failure, carnival, profane, negativity, refusal and mischief not as shortcomings but as potential to invent something new. Failure as a feminist space or a location can offer safety and freedom outside the societal norms that currently limit our queer existence.

To fail is a powerful position to hold and the more we do it and practice failing the more powerful we can become in our ambition to bring down the winners. Groups like Loldiers of Odin, whether finding them inspiring, provoking or just plain annoying, our feeling towards clowns often reveal more about us than about the clown themselves. Our views on what is funny, evil, stupid or threatening are affected by our racial, gendered and class-based assumptions and a clown breaking many of these rules is a living reminder of that. Clown is our fear of failure personified.

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